The Melancholy of Her Goodbye

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It was so easy for him to say goodbye. It was not the case for her.

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Away

Disclaimer: I do not own the characters from Naruto… only the weird things I put them through in my fic. Yeah, life's a bitch and all.

After dreaming about this for days and days, I finally decided to suck it up and write my first NaruSaku fic. First, because if I don't, I'll probably go crazy thinking about this story all the time. And second, well, I'm afraid that if I don't write it, it'll be stuck in my head for a long time and I wouldn't be able to focus on more important things, you know, like studies and life. Anyway, on with the story. I hope you like it. =)

I apologize if this sucks.

Chapter 1: I'll Stay Away

Melancholy

- a bad and peevish disease which makes men degenerate into beasts (Melanius)

- a depravation of the principal function (Galen)

- a commotion of the mind (Halyabbas)

- a perpetual anguish of the soul, fastened on one thing, without an ague.

From the Anatomy of Melancholy

May 14, Present day, Konoha

She walked the familiar path leading to the academy, the rustle of the wind leading her. Nobody would be around today, she thought.

Everybody was going to be *there*, except for her. She wasn't invited, more like she wasn't allowed, so all that's left was, well, to go somewhere else. She decided to visit the academy again, something she did everyday for the past three years. She would always wait there, and have her peace in theswing, the little piece of solace she considered.

A woman, barely twenty two years old could be seen walking inside the Ninja Academy. She wore civilian clothes- a long skirt that ended above her ankles, a pink turtleneck and cream sweater that covered almost her hands. Her clothes covered her too pale skin and her skinny figure. Her once bright pink hair had now dulled into a lighter shade and she had let it grow that it reached her lower back. If anyone saw her now, they wouldn't recognize her. But then again, nobody even looked at her these days, even when the academy was full of people. Even her green eyes seemed to be swimming now in a grey of solitude. She walked slowly through the halls of the academy, finding it hard to drag one foot in front of the other. Alone. She always came alone.

Solitude wasn't something that bothered her anymore. At first, it drove her to madness, but time was an excellent conditioner to one's tolerance. Now, the silence that accompanied being alone made her calm and collected, nevermind the miserable part. She reached the playground, the cold breeze swaying her hair. It wasn't really that lively when there weren't any children that played in it. The playground was so desolate, a state she had been accustomed to. A smile crept to her face as she saw that tattered swing, the one that was isolated, located at the farthest tree in the playground. Despite its age, the strings of the swing kept its hold on the tree. As she made her way to it, it sort of gave her a light feeling. Even on days when it was a struggle to even walk, she always made her way to that swing, thinking that maybe the one that she was waiting for everyday would come. Though she knew that today wasn't going to be any different, she still came to visit that swing. It had become a routine. The fact the no one ever came became irrelevant.

She sat down on the swing, and started to sway back and forth. She let her tired eyes close and gathered air in her lungs.

He's going to get married today, she thought. She smiled. It was sincere. But a part of her wanted to let the tears come, but she never allowed it to.

He's happy, so I'm happy.

I bet his kids would be would be a handful.

He's gonna be a great dad.

I'm sure of it.

"I'm so happy for you, Naruto," she finally said. A familiar warmth wrapped her heart in a painful way. The one who changed her, the one who made her realize the most important thing in life, was going to start a new chapter in his life. He had moved on. Today, he was going to marry Hyuga Hinata, the heiress to one of the most powerful clans in the village, the woman he was seeing for three years now. It was a perfect match. Ever since Naruto learned of his family heritage, the Namikaze clan, it was sure to follow that he be with a woman from a powerful family. With these families tied, Naruto would have the upper-hand politically *and* genetically. They would produce talented and strong offsprings.

As she swung, Sakura imagined how handsome Naruto would be. He hadn't talked to her for a while. She assumed his hair had grown longer but still retained its wild features, still as lively as he is. She had only known that he was going to get married because the whole Fire country was buzzing about the wedding of the year, if not the decade. It was a really big event. That was why there were no class in the academy. Most of the people in the village would be there, of course.

All her thoughts were interrupted by a sudden fit of coughing. Immediately, she tightened one hand's grip to the swing, anticipating

the surge. While her head jerked violently, her left hand to covered her mouth, the other desperately trying to hold on to the string of the swing.

It lasted for about a minute. She felt so weak as she leaned her head to the rope she held on to. Her hand was covered in blood now, and she couldn't help but succumb to the weakening feeling of her body.

She had expected it, though.

Naruto was getting married and would have the chance to be happy and have a family.

He would soon be Hokage.

But she, she was stuck.

She would never move on.

She was slowly dying.

Dying, but always be waiting for him in that spot where the swing was once his sanctuary from all the hurt.

Yes, people were getting what they deserved.

It was something she had realized a long time ago.

For once, she wanted to get it over with already.

To be continued…

What do you think? Think I should continue?

Drop me a line anytime.

Thanks! =)

Sacrifice

Disclaimer: I do not own the characters from Naruto, I just dream of them.

Hey guys! I'm so happy that you like this story. *giggles like a little girl* To tell you honestly, I've been having bad days, weeks, and months now, and your reviews made me smile and I felt better in a long time. So here is the next chapter of the story. Enjoy!

Chapter 2: Her Sacrifice

Three years ago.

She couldn't tell that it was him. If it weren't for the orange jacket that had been torn in front of this creature in front of her, she wouldn't have known that it was him.

Piercing screams of agony could be heard from the boy. His body was contorted and it seemed like it was burning with red flames. His teeth were elongated fangs and he was writhing, clawing at the ground beneath him.

It's the kyuubi. He's letting out all of the beast's tails, Sakura thought as her heart was overwhelmed with searing pain. They knew this battle would have to be the end. And Naruto knew this too. Of course, he would've set all hell lose if it meant he could protect the people most precious to him. Which led them to this moment.

Sakura knew there wasn't enough time. Naruto no longer had the necklace that let Yamato keep the Kyuubi's chakra from coming out. She knew that if she did nothing, Naruto would be swallowed by the monster in him and would destroy everything that he loved. She had to decide now or it would be too late.

She remembered that time when they had fought Orochimaru in that wretched bridge. Naruto had let loose four tails and she felt so

helpless not being able to wake him up from his rage. Everything had ended badly and she vowed never to let that happen again. So from that day on, she had researched night and day on the sealing of beasts. It took a lot of sneaking in the Hokage's private library and even in the oldest archives of the village.

The only one who had managed to seal the Nine-tailed beast was Namikaze Minato, and he had been a genius and a strong ninja at that. She found some decipherable codes and files and had learned the chakra manipulation it took to seal a beast. She had also studied the all there is to Naruto's chakra channels and its behavior when he uses his own chakra and when he releases some of the Kyuubi's. She had formulated a rough methodology on how to prevent any of the dangerous chakra from leaking out Naruto's body and destroying him. Of course, all of it were book-wise. She knew that if this technique would work it would have to be done by a skilled shinobi. Someone like the late Jiraiya-sama or Tsunade. All Sakura was capable of was perfect chakra manipulation and her skills are not at that with the level of a genius Hokage. But at least, she had a plan. She though it was a damn good back-up plan. Of course, there were loopholes to this, like how to get near Naruto enough for the seal to work without being burned alive. But she hoped fervently that she would have enough time to figure things out, to be ready.

But the battle had been too soon. And here she was, the only one with Naruto when he cannot control the beast inside him.

"Stop this Naruto! Don't do this!," she screamed so loud that her throat constricted painfully.

"Please! It's over. You've defeated them! Please let's go home!"

"Remember our promise? When this is all over, we'll celebrate your birthday and I'll tell you something. Please don't….I can't do this."

All she received in response was a loud howl. The flame was quickly engulfing his body and another, a seventh tail was coming out from behind the creature. Sakura tried to hold out her hand to the boy's

face, but it burned it so quickly. Her body was so tired and battered from the battle, but it refused to run away. Naruto had been the one who always saved her life, who loved her even when she didn't deserve it, which was most of the time. She refused to let him go. She will not let him die.

She searched deep within her for the strength to save Naruto. There was no way in hell that she was going to live without him. She closed her tearful eyes and pictured Naruto's smiling face, his eyes as blue and deep and his hair a lot brighter than the shining sun. She was almost out of chakra, but still she searched for that strength. It was a damn shame that she didn't possess any powerful jutsu or a bloodline limit that could help her save this boy. But she will not give up. She drew a deep breath and willed all her courage to do what was supposed to be done. If this didn't work, then she'd die with Naruto. It wasn't like she was going to live long if Naruto weren't there to be with her. She had decided.

Hot tears flowed down her bruised cheek as she heard Naruto's growls become impossibly louder.

"Please give me something," she prayed to the heavens to make her strong enough for once.

You really wish to save him,? A soft voice said. Where did it come from? She didn't know. Inner Sakura had long been gone and this voice wasn't hers. It was so familiar, yet unidentifiable. Maybe she was being deluded but still she answered.

"Yes," she said with all the determination she could muster.

You are going to die for this boy. It wasn't a question, it was a statement. Sealing the nine tails had been fatal for the Fourth. Now, as she attempted to seal seven, she would probably have the same fate.

"Yes." She was never as sure as this her entire life.

And just like that a painful flow of overwhelming chakra flowed through her channels. She had never felt so much chakra in her system. But she didn't question its origins. All she knew was that she was going to save Naruto. It was like her body was being ripped apart by the surge of energy but it didn't matter.

Pulling off a scroll from her backpack, she concentrated all her renewed chakra and bit her thumb for the blood to flow. With a fast gesture of hand signs, she started her summon. It took a lot out of her, but she willed her concentration to hold.

A black smoke appeared in front of her as the God of Death materialized, his red piercing eyes burrowing into Sakura's tearful ones. His arms were soggy with a dark liquid and he was cloaked in tattered rags.

"Help me." Sakura was almost surprised to see the God of Death in the flesh. In the ninja world, he had been a myth. But Sakura took her chance, and there he was. He was said to aid people for a price, and Sakura read about this creature in the oldest scrolls in the archives. With regards to the sealing of beasts, creatures of the supernatural were said to be needed to intervene. After all, the occurrence of beasts are a supernatural phenomenon. The Deathgod would be able to suppress the beast long enough for it to be sealed to a mortal. That was what the scrolls said. Now, Sakura thought, he was the real deal.

"I can. But you will pay the price, young girl."

"Take everything you want. Just save him."

"Hmm… You are digging your own grave. Just like Namikaze Minato." He said sullenly.

"Will you help me or not?," she said. There was no more time for argument. A few more minutes and the eight tail would come out.

"As you wish." With that, he extended his cold hands to hold Sakura's face. And just like that, he was sucking the life out of her.

"Three quarters of your life is the price."

Sakura was surprised. She thought this Deathgod would take the remainder of her life. Her wide eyes confirmed her thoughts.

"There is more suffering in living than in death, girl. For this big of a favor, a swift death would not be enough of a price." Who knew Deathgods would be so sadistic?

"Fine." Sakura said.

"You have one minute to do the seal." And then he let go. Sakura slumped forward as she felt her life drained away from her. It wasn't just fatigue and loss of strength that she felt, it was so much more painful and weakening.

With wobbly legs she reached for Naruto. The Kyuubi's chakra was being suppressed. But a small sheet like flame still engulfed his body. She formed the hand signs and reached for his chest.

"Everything's going to be okay, Naruto. I'll make it okay." She said as she smiled. She let the remainder of her chakra flow as she visualized the seal for the Kyuubi. She screamed like never before in her life. The sheet of flame was crawling through her arms. The longer she held onto him, the more painful it got. Even with the Deathgod suppressing the chakra, it still wounded her in the deepest of ways. But she held her hands in place. Burning be damned.

Twenty seconds passed. And as she was concentrating on the the bars that she visualized as a hold for the Kyuubi, she saw a dark smoke forming around her. Then, she was there, in front of a giant red fox, his eyes menacing and fangs bared for her to see. Sakura felt her hold on the seal and willed to strengthen it. More bars were materializing now, and the seal would be in tact again. She had

thought of how to make a better seal for a long time. And now, she was doing it.

"You won't hurt him ever again."

"Foolish girl, do you think you can really cage me in this mortal?" His voice was deep and furious.

"I do. And while you are in him, you are going to let him use your power without hurting him in any way."

A loud annoying laugh echoed. Sakura was in pain. She had never experienced this much agony. It was like her body was breaking on a cellular level. But she kept her head high, her eyes meeting the Kyuubi's.

"No one can handle my power. Not even Naruto."

"He will handle your strength, and you are going to let him. Because if you don't, you are going to die."

"I will not die, this boy you love so much will. That's what brought you to this moment, remember?"

"That's where you are wrong. See those bars holding you? I made those to be linked to your seat of chakra, the center of your strength. If that were to break, you will die. And if Naruto were to die without you breaking out of him, you will die," she said with a smirk. The pain she felt no longer bothered her, for now.

"I know you are a very proud beast, and you would want the world to know of your power. And the only way to do that now, is to lend Naruto your power. That small outlet I've created in the middle of that cage is for your chakra flow to be one with Naruto's at your will. Your power can be let out little by little so that his body won't be damaged. I've strengthened his channels to handle the maximum power that you can give him, as long as enough gradual time permits it." She said that breathlessly. It was like she was really dying.

"You thought of everything, didn't you? You made and modified your own sealing technique to benefit the boy. But what about you? You don't look so good," he said menacingly. The beast wondered how this seemingly weak girl could pull off such a powerful technique on him. From what he felt in this new cage, what the girl said was true. The former seal by the Fourth left weak spots and weren't connected in any way to his chakra, it only inhibited him. But now, as he tried to struggle out of the cage, he felt pained and constricted.

Interesting girl. For her to have made this technique and still be strong enough to have thrown him a glare, it must take more than sheer will.

Sakura ignored his question. She knew that he knew that her life was the price to pay for that seal.

"I want you to promise me something."

Was this girl crazy? She must be delusional, that was about right.

"What might that be?"

"I want you to promise to protect Naruto."

The demon fox was now really amused. He laughed so loud that it hurt Sakura's ear.

"Promise to protect him by lending him your strength whenever he needs it. I know the seal enables you now to do so, but you still have the option to not give him power and just let the both of you die. There is still that possibility. I don't want you to hold a grudge against him for keeping you here. It's not his fault, nor is it yours. It's just that if you broke free, Naruto would die. So this is the only way."

"I also know that you can communicate with him. You were once a warrior and I think he will value your opinion when it comes to dangerous things. Just make him listen. He can really be stupid

sometimes and it would help if you kept him in line with those things that could really kill him."

That was a mouthful. This girl was really something, the Kyuubi thought. Alright, he was going to ride along with this girl.

"Two things. First, you are right. I can just let this boy die and refuse to lend him power. I could kill him. Although it would be difficult now because as you said, I would die too. And second, why do you think I would promise that ridiculous thing you want me to do?"

"Because I asked you to." To say the fox beast was surprised was an understatement.

"And because I know that you have the capacity to care for things other than yourself. Naruto is a very kind and gentle person. And I know you know that. You care about him. So please." Her eyes were both pleading and determined at the same time. Aside from Naruto, the fox never met someone so stubborn and dare he say, endearing. No one had ever asked him for something and appealed to his caring side.

"Fine. I promise." The Kyuubi didn't know why he acquiesced, but he knew that this girl was not going to take no for an answer.

"Thank you." Sakura said with a smile. The caged beast was more surprised. Nobody had smiled for him.

"And please don't tell Naruto that I did this."

"It is not in my business to interfere with the boy's life."

For a moment, Sakura felt relieved. She had done the most difficult task, to earn the fox's cooperation.

And then this raging pins and needles caught her as her vision was brought back to reality. Her back was aching, like someone just burned it. She was still holding her hands over Naruto's chest. They

were burned. Renewed tears caught her eyes as she saw him in his normal state. He had his eyes closed and she could tell that he was no longer in pain. That was a good sign. The Deathgod had disappeared, and everything was quiet. It was like nothing had happened. If it were not for the stabbing pain that she felt all over her right now, she would've believed that nothing had. Her back was now carved with black markings of the Deathgod's symbol and her chest also had the mark of the Nine tails, a symbol that she had performed the seal on him.

This time, instead of Naruto, she was the one in pain. Holding her arms out to hold him, she slumped forward. She enveloped him in her hug, crying her eyes out. With what the Deathgod has said, he took away three quarters of her life. Assuming that she had the average person's lifespan, that would give her five years left. The pain she felt now even as she breathed would be a reminder of that.

"Five years, Naruto. I'd spend five good years with you. And I'll savor every moment of it," she said while holding him. She would never tell Naruto what she did. It would devastate him. It would be her secret to keep til the time would run out.

Naruto would live a long and happy life. That's what mattered.

To be continued….

There we go. Whew! That was a long one. I apologize if my imagination didn't stretch enough to think of a better way to depict the re-sealing of the Kyuubi. I really did try. Please don't hate me.

And by the way, that voice that Sakura heard and the power that she suddenly got will be explained in time.

So did you like it? Please review. It really makes my day.

The more reviews I receive, the faster the updated will be.

Thanks! Til next time! =)

Promises

Disclaimer: I do not own the characters from Naruto. I honestly don't think that I own anything. That's how poor I am.

A/N: What's up guys? First, I'd like to thank everyone who've read this story. I didn't think anyone would bother. So everyone has been great. And also, I've edited the summary. I hope it's a better one. Thanks!

Now, on with the story. And all of this chapter takes place three years ago before Sakura does the sealing. =)

Chapter 3: Remembered Promises

All his life Naruto thought that no one would ever see him. That he was a ghost of some painful past that everyone was trying to get away from. He had not understood. But like most people, all he wanted was for someone to see him, to feel the warmth of a real person, and for people to show some sign of acknowledgment that he was alive. And he thought that he would forever be searching. But soon enough, he found one.

Naruto was a kind person. That much he knew that about himself. As he grew up, he desired to be the greatest shinobi of them all so he can protect the people in his village. Even when they expected nothing of him, he knew somewhere in his heart that Konoha would be the home that he would always protect and love. Somehow, he had found friendship with the other genins of his time and had felt the stronger urge to be the one to make things okay for them. He had finally created bonds. And he cherished every one of them, even the ones with Sasuke, and especially those that he made with Sakura.

The first time Naruto saw the girl with the wide forehead and pink locks, he knew he had been captured. He had been in the middle of

the street, busy with glaring at all those people who looked at him like he was some kind of monster. *Someday, someday you'll all acknowledge me,* he thought. Then a sudden movement of pink caught his eye. It was a girl, holding on to a woman's skirt. And she was looking at him. What was different was that she wasn't looking at him with disgust, she was merely innocently looking, tilting her head in the process. Hers were the green eyes that would forever be the most beautiful thing he has ever seen. Her gaze had been so soft and serene. Naruto had been a child then, but he knew that something was drawing him to this beautiful creature. Before he could approach her, she was already gone in the crowd. But what he felt at that moment got him through all the bad times, because he knew he had a purpose, and it was with that girl that he would finally be home.

Naruto would soon be that girl's team mate and would know her name: Sakura. And for quite some time, he had to earn her trust and confidence. And he was patient with her, even when he rejected his attempts for dates and when she would hit his head for being an idiot. He knew that she was smitten with someone else - Sasuke, who was also a precious comrade, a brother. But he had understood that maybe all that was meant for himself and Sakura was to be friends. He accepted that. As long as he could stay by her side, then all was well.

But things started to change. Sasuke left and Sakura was devastated. He had been too, if not more. So he promised her that he would bring him back. Through all those failed attempts and rigorous training that both of them went through, Naruto knew things had really changed. His love grew stronger for the girl and she, well, she had become protective and caring of him. She had not been bothered that he possessed a beast inside him, rather she had understood him more. Naruto was human, and he couldn't help but hope that she would return the feelings that he so long held for her.

The night before the final battle with Akatsuki, he wanted to spend his time with her. They had been through so much, and he knew that

it would be a difficult battle to win. They didn't know where Sasuke's loyalty rested anymore and it made things complicated. For Naruto, Sasuke became a sad and distant memory, but Sakura for him was someone who owned a big part of his heart, if not the whole. She was his now.

"What if Sasuke doesn't come to help?," she said as they were seated beside each other on the grass, gazing at the stars which were surprisingly out that night.

"Come on, Sakura-chan. He'll come. He loves us too much," he said grinning at her. But honestly, he didn't know.

"Also, Madara's done enough to stain the name of the Uchiha clan. If he doesn't come to help us, then Sasuke will definitely come for him.," he added.

"You're right." Naruto knew that something was bothering her that night. The red stained in her cheeks was enough proof. Also, she had become secretive for some time. She always wanted to be alone during training, and had profusely refused Naruto's company even when she went to the library. Sure, he wasn't into reading books but he just wanted to spend time with her. He never had the chance to ask her what was wrong until that night.

"You're not telling me something," he said.

"You know, you have the bluest eyes I've ever seen." To say that Naruto was taken aback was an understatement. Something was definitely up with her.

"Sakura-chan, what are you ---" She hugged him. And he felt her warmth enveloping his whole being.

"I promise you that I'll protect you and I won't leave you. Once the battle starts, I won't leave you. I promise." She was the one who said it.

"I'm the one who should be saying that. This is my fight Sakura. But you know it really means so much that you said that. You really promise?"

"Yes. I promise. The promise of a lifetime."

"Then I'll hold on to that, okay?"

"You bet." Something in Naruto's heart flared so much stronger: hope. Maybe she does love him.

"Your birthday's coming soon, ne?" she interrupted his thoughts. She was smiling.

"Really? I guess I forgot."

"Come on, Naruto. Just because tomorrow we'll be fighting for our lives doesn't mean you can't look forward to you birthday. You'll be nineteen!," she said as she giggled. That was her way of lightening the mood.

"Fine, I'm sorry. But we have those Akatsuki guys to worry about first." he said as he sighed. It was really his birthday soon. He hoped he would live long enough for that.

"I have a gift for you."

"Really? Gimme, gimme!" he was now jumping up and down like a little child.

"Nope. We have to wait til your birthday, Naruto."

"But Sakura-chan!!!!," he whined.

"I won't give it to you now. But I will on your birthday. We can meet up on your swing at the academy and we'll celebrate."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I promise."

"Wow. That's two promises in a row now Sakura-chan.," he joked. In honesty, he had never been so happy in his life. He felt that his bond with Sakura was becoming stronger and stronger. But he was scared too, because it made her all the more precious to him.

"I know. But you deserve it. And you can count on me to keep them," she was smiling that smile again. The one that she only used when she was with him.

He was too busy thinking about her that when his thoughts were brought back to Earth, he was so surprised that her lips were pressed to his. It was a brief connection that he didn't have time to close his eyes, but he sure as hell felt it. And it was like nothing he had felt before.

"Sakura-chan, I…" he was interrupted when her fingers pressed on his mouth.

"It's okay. We'll figure it out. After the battle."

She was already walking away. But she was right. It was not the time to figure out such things. But in that moment Naruto felt that he would do everything in his power to be with Sakura. His prayers were finally answered. All that's left was to finish the battle so he could be with be with her. Forever and ever.

But that was his mistake. He assumed too many things. He hoped too much.

To be continued….

So what do you think guys? I hope that things that I'm writing still make sense. Haha. I need this chapter as a foundation for what happens in the following ones. And it would help that you readers know what Naruto felt before Sakura had to make her sacrifice.

Please review. And please don't hate me too much. My poor heart can't take it. Thanks! Happy holidays!

Selfish

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto, which is hard cause all the time I think I do. Bwahaha!

Hi everyone! So sorry for the slow update. I could give you a long list why I wasn't able to update these days, but that would make me really pathetic. Haha.

Anyway, thank for all the favorites and alerts,and especially the reviews for this story. I really appreciate it. I hope they keep on coming. Cause it makes me feel warm inside. Tell you what, if I get more than ten reviews for this chapter, the next one will be much faster. *wink*

Enough of that, now here's the next chapter. And oh, it's kind of sad.

Chapter 4: Selfish

"Go away, Sakura… I'm done with you."

Uzumaki Naruto was accustomed to pain. But not this much pain. It was as if life was making fun of him. He was destiny's clown. He would always be presented with some opportunity to be happy, and when he would become stupid and delusional enough to grab it, it would disappear into a mist of disappointment and utter failure. And just like that, everything falls apart. But he was for sure naïve, because after all the failed attempts at being anything other than miserable, he would still believe in happy endings. But not this time.

His chest ached. After the battle, one would think that the kind of pain he would experience would be the physical kind from all the stabs and bruises that he had sustained. But everything felt normal, good even, but only physically. Only one part him had hurt, and it was that which mattered the most.

He remembered last night, the night before the battle, the night when the he had felt like everything was finally going to be okay. But of course, as always, odds were against him. He remembered fighting so hard during the battle, defeating every last one of them, trying to protect Sakura who stayed beside him.

It was her promise that she would never leave him no matter what, and they after the battle they would settle what feelings she may have for him. What Sakura promised him was the most important thing he was holding on to. It was selfish, to want her for only himself and not for anyone, not even Sasuke. But everyone was allowed to be like that once in a while, right? Especially when the person you're holding on to is the one which keeps you sane and alive. Because of the possibility of having Sakura, he looked forward to the future. Because of it, he was not afraid of anything anymore, not even death. But everything had gone completely out of his control.

At his last battle, he could feel every ounce of his body aching to fight. And even after he had defeated his enemy, Naruto could not control the power that threatened to burst out from him. That was all he could remember. That, and the fact that he was struggling so much to keep his eyes open, open for Sakura.

He could feel the Kyuubi crawling its way through his skin, trying to burn him to pieces so it could free itself. He was being transported to the realm of the monster, away from reality. He couldn't see the battlefield now, couldn't see Sakura. It was the price of wanting its power. He had won all this time because the monster inside him lent him its power. But using it too much meant he was loosening its hold on its cage. It meant the nine-tailed monster had the upper hand, and would take over anytime soon.

No, he thought to himself. What about Sakura? He needed his grip on reality. He couldn't let himself burn now. He struggled and struggled against the pain. He couldn't give up now, not when everything was finally getting better.

Then suddenly, a burst of energy went through his system. A surge of warmth he thought he had never felt before, almost similar to the warmth he felt when Sakura kissed him. Where it came from, he didn't know. But it made him stop struggling. All at once, the pain stopped seizing. It wasn't painful at all. Instead, it was like he was being injected with a sedative, like he was being put to sleep. All was black.

What's happening here? Was that how it felt like for the Kyuubi to take over his body? The monster was making him sleep? No, it didn't feel like that. Cause the warmth was still there, and it felt too good. Wasn't he burning a moment ago? He thought of all these things while he was on that black abyss. It's like he was on a high. He wanted to open his eyes, see what was happening. But he couldn't, it felt like the sensation all over him was protectively holding him over the pain. What was it? Was it the result of his struggling? No,it was like someone was taking the pain away.

He had won over the Kyuubi, finally. Whatever it was that happened, *he* managed to do it.

After what seemed like a lifetime, he felt a thud, his body. He opened his eyes, and woke up to a sky, twilight already. He jumped at the thought. He was now on the battlefield. He looked at his body, checking the pain that was once there. But he didn't hurt anywhere. Besides his bloody and torn up jumpsuit, everything was okay. And then a thought came rushing through him.

"Sakura-chan?," he called. He recalled when was the last time he saw her. She was there when he had his last fight with Pain and all his cursed clones.

She must have wandered off when she was fighting. He listened to any sound of fighting. There was none. And he was pretty sure that by the time that the Kyuubi tried to take over him, the battle had already been won. Where was Sakura? Maybe she was looking for him. She promised, he thought, his possessive nature taking over him.

He wandered through the field, his feet grazing the rough surface of the grass. He thought of Sasuke, and felt relieved that in the end, he chose to do the right thing and fought Madara to end his madness. That was a thought, maybe he and Sakura could find him and thank him, maybe even persuade him to finally come home. Surely, the village wouldn't prosecute the person who helped end the battle against Akatsuki. That reminded him, reinforcements from all over the Fire country would soon come. He had to find Sakura before he would be badgered with questions.

His hearing led Naruto through the high trees of the field. Someone was talking. So he followed the sound, almost running towards it and tripping once or twice. Was it Sakura? And then he saw her, his Sakura-chan, who had her back turned to him. She was with someone. And that someone was holding her, cradling her head on his chest. His eyes widened at the realization. Sasuke? He was still too far to hear what they were talking, but could pick up some of the words.

"Thank you… for being here, " he heard Sasuke say.

"… Sorry, I thought I was too late… Naruto," that was all he could hear from her. What about him?

"Sasuke, I did something… Naruto doesn't know, he can't know…" She was sobbing. He thought her voice was filled with guilt, and pain.

Sasuke just let her sob and said nothing after that. The sight made Naruto's chest heave heavily, something was crushing it. He let out a choked cry. The evidence was there, but he didn't want to believe it.

"I have to go back… Naruto… must be looking for me… He can't know."

Know what? That she broke her promise? That she used him, made him believe that she held feelings for him? That was it, Sakura used him, to get to Sasuke. And he, Naruto couldn't know, because he

would see Sakura for who she is - a manipulative, scheming woman. He had deduced that in seconds of watching the two people. This realization would stick to him for the next years. How could she do that? It made his blood boil. He didn't deserve that.

Enough was enough.

"I can't know what?," he said mockingly as he strode to where Sakura and Sasuke were.

The eyes of the girl he had loved for the longest time widened in shock. Sasuke regarded him, a silent question in his face.

"Naruto…"

Sakura seemed to struggle trying to stand up. She looked so tired, her clothes bloody. She staggered toward him. If he were paying attention, Naruto would've noticed the burns all over her body. But he wasn't, and years later, he would not be paying attention to her.

"I know! I can't know that you, Sakura, used me. All those bullshit promises! All for your precious Sasuke-kun. Damn it, stay away from me!"

Venom was all over his voice. He had never been so angry. And again, if he paid attention, he would notice how the Kyuubi wasn't reacting to his anger, he wasn't in danger of the monster being freed from his body.

Sakura reached him helplessly, eyes pleading.

"Naruto, that's not true." Her eyes were watering, her face twisted in pain.

"Then what's true? Huh? Did you even hear me dying out there? You were there, weren't you? This fucking monster in me was burning me alive! And what did you do? You chose to go to him!"

"It's not…"

"Then tell me the truth!," he bellowed. He stared at Sakura with all the disgust and hatred he could muster. She just looked at him with tears. She couldn't answer him.

"I thought so." It pained him to see her like that. But the betrayal he felt weighed more. He felt his love for her, which owned his whole heart, burning in his ribcage. He wanted to get rid of it. Tears of his own flowed on its own in his face.

"Stop it. Stop the pain… ," he said, clutching his chest so hard.

"No, no, please Naruto." Again, she struggled towards him. She was still keeping up her act, he thought.

"Stay away from me! Not another step," he warned. He wasn't going to be betrayed anymore. She looked so helpless, but he ignored the God-awful pain that tugged his heart to hold her.

"And you!," he pointed an accusing finger to the person who had just listened to Naruto and Sakura's conversation with an unreadable expression on his face.

"You were my brother! You don't even care about either of us! You would leave me to die. Never have you shown any care for her, and now… God! The people I love!," he was speaking incoherently now. It was too much for him. Everything he thought he believed in all this time was a lie. There were no happy endings, only pain.

"You need to relax, dobe."

"No! I won't listen to you this time! I am done. I'm not stupid, and I never will be in your eyes!" He was walking away. And Sasuke just stayed silent.

"Naruto, don't do this. Please!" Was she pleading for him so she can betray him, again? Not this time.

"Go away, Sakura… I'm done with you."

There was a limit to how much of pain a person could take. He was beyond that limit. What he wanted now was to get rid of Sakura, erase everything she has imprinted on him. Forget her. Yes, forget. He ignored it, the fire in his heart, telling him to turn around, to listen to what she had to say. He ignored a big part of his being that told him that Sakura was in pain. He knew that he was going to ignore it for a long time.

Naruto woke up in cold sweat, his chest twisting in a familiar pain that he was used to ignoring for some time now. It had been what, two, three years after that happened? He hadn't tried to remember it. And he had succeeded so far.

He wondered now why he dreamed of it. Dreamed of the crying woman pleading for him to stay. Dreamed of her. It was the first time in a long time.

Cold hands found its way through his chest. The woman who slept beside him stared at him with milky eyes. She had twisted her body from the bed so she was sitting, the silk blanket covering her naked form.

"Something wrong, honey?"

"No. Just a nightmare."

"Hmm? I sure hope that not a nightmare about our wedding. I can't have you getting cold feet," she chuckled as she kissed his jaw.

"No, Hinata. Not about that," he said without a humor in his voice.

"Good. Now get some sleep. We need to meet the clan in the morning. You know how father is when we're late."

"I know. Go sleep now. Sorry I woke you."

"No problem," she kissed his mouth, then curled up on his chest. Purple hair grazed Naruto's skin, as he wound his arm around the woman's waist.

He didn't get to return to sleep that night, his mind and heart wondering why he had remembered leaving Sakura. A hollow pain stabbed at his chest.

A/N What do you think guys? Do you like it? I'm playing with the timeline here. I hope nobody's confused. And please take note that all of this chapter is from Naruto's point of view.

It was kinda hard to write this. Naruto was really confused, and hatred blinded him. Poor Sakura. She really didn't know what to do. *sobs*And of course, the reason why she was with Sasuke when Naruto woke up will be revealed eventually. Thanks!

Please review. And please not too much flames. :)

Dénouement

Disclaimer: Masashi Kishimoto owns Naruto. Although I really hate him right now, cause Naruto should be with Sakura.

Okay guys, I know I said that I would pick up the pace for updates, but you have to forgive me. I could've written this chapter faster if I hadn't read that damned interview by Kishimoto, the one where he said that Sakura was really in love with Sasuke. I mean, really, if he was really intending on making that pairing, he could've just foregone all the foreshadowings in the manga for NaruSaku. I mean, come on! That's just so wrong. Most people might disagree with me on this, but I really don't care. I can't help it if I'm upset. I know that I said that I didn't care if NaruSaku wasn't the canon (I mean, that's the reason why I'm writing fanfics), but a part of me was really pissed off when I learned about this, coming from Kishimoto himself. And yeah, I sulked for days.

So that's the story. I'm really sorry if this is a late update. And so sorry for the rant.

But I hope you like this chapter. Enjoy!

Chapter 5: Dénouement

He stared at her, his eyes seemingly boring at the sight before him. The woman was smiling before him, eyes dull and face pale as though she had gone through a lifetime of winter. For a twenty- year-old, she sure looked a lot older, and more pained. Weren't women like her supposed to be off with their boyfriends planning about weddings, children and whatnot? This woman was different. Although she had a simple smile in her lips, but Dr. Yuy couldn't help but feel the somber melancholy in Haruno Sakura's face.

Haji Yuy was a medical surgeon of the highest caliber known throughout the Fire Country. He was never the ninja-type, but he

sure was one of the most talented names in the medical field, specializing in both civilian and ninja diagnostic cases. That and the fact that he was astoundingly handsome - with his mesmerizing black orbs, knee-length chocolate brown hair, and well-built toned physique, earned him quite a reputation all over the country. But along with this reputation came the fact that he was never a people person. He sure was brilliant, but he was also arrogant, always taking to himself and shunning people.

For his talent, he could easily have become the top medic at the Konoha Hospital, but he never got there because he only attended to the cases which interested him, which were very rare. No matter how much a patient begged for him to take a case, if he wasn't interested, he wasn't interested. And no amount of pressure, even from the Hokage herself could make him budge. A normal doctor would've been fired for this kind of behavior, but because Dr. Yuy was that much of an asset to Konoha, the Hokage put up with him.

For Haji, his was a monotonous, mundane life. But he always got what he wanted, so it was acceptable. At thirty-five, he thought that as a doctor and a human being, he had seen everything, until he Haruno Sakura barged into his office demanding a consult.

He had heard of her - Haruno Sakura, the Godaime Hokage's apprentice with the super strength and a high-level intelligence. She trained under the Hokage's intense medical program for some years and had easily earned the reputation of being the next top medic-nin. She had become an advanced intern in the hospital and he had seen her once or twice perform solo surgeries. She was indeed a talented medic at a young age.

But a little over six months ago, she began missing her rounds in the hospital. There were rumors that she had become too arrogant that she would think of herself as better than any other medic or doctor in the hospital. She would miss her internship for weeks and then come to the hospital looking tired and distracted. Being the Godaime's apprentice, she was always let go with a warning. But more rumors spread. Others said that like Orochimaru, she may have been

performing forbidden experiments somewhere. Because of this, she had also lost her usual cheerful personality. A lot of people noticed that she had changed. Also, that annoying blonde-brat stopped coming to the hospital demanding to see Sakura. What was his name? Naruto, Haji remembered. Things went on like this until one day, a friend and fellow medic, Yamanaka Ino found her in a storage room injecting herself with a large dosage of morphine. Yamanaka demanded an explanation but Sakura just walked away wearily. Yamanaka got so mad and had become tired of Sakura's aloofness that she just gave up on coaxing the girl into explanation. Rumor had it that Sakura was doing drugs because she couldn't take the pressure of being the star medic, and there was also the pressure of outshining Yamanaka, her eternal rival in the field. Sakura refused to comment on this, and the last thing that Haji heard was that she was sent to the Hokage for what could possibly be an intervention and some reprimanding.

One could only imagine the doctor's bewilderment when she suddenly shows up at Haji Yuy's office, clothed in civilian clothes and looking like she just went through hell, chatted with the devil and came back to Earth with Satan's fork in her back. He noted her labored breathing and the stern look in her eyes didn't give him the slightest chance to send her away.

"Ah, the infamous Haruno Sakura. What do you want?," he said in his usual boring tone.

"I need a consult," she replied while trying to pull her already stretched sleeve to cover her hands.

"I can see that. But I think you're in the wrong office. If you need a consult, go to the Hokage's office. She is one great medic, of course. I'm sure she'd take the time to do a check-up on her talented apprentice." The sarcastic tone in his voice was impossible to miss.

"I'm not the Hokage's apprentice anymore."

If Haji was even surprised with this news, he sure concealed it perfectly with his bored expression.

"Oh?"

"I was relieved of all the privileges of a Hokage's apprentice just yesterday. Tsunade-sama gave up all her responsibilities of being my master. In other words, she has no business with me anymore. I can't bother her."

"And you think you can bother me?," he said, putting both his legs on top of his desk.

"It doesn't seem like you're busy," she said with a cock of her head.

"I'm not interested in taking you as my patient. Go see some other doctor. I think Yamamoto-sensei would take you with open arms."

"You don't even know what I have. Besides, I'm sick."

"No shit, Haruno-san…" Maybe it was because of her rumored addiction? She was indeed in a lot of pain. His trained eye had deduced that much.

"I want you to be my doctor, no one else." For the first time, a possible patient was looking at him, not with desperation, but with a demanding confidence.

"Look, I am the most difficult doctor in this whole hospital. And I have the power to throw you out of this office, and no one can say shit about it, not even the Hokage. What makes you think I'm going to take your case? Why me? " He was being serious now. No one could force him into taking Haruno's case. He knew that this woman would give him too much trouble.

"Nobody likes you, and you don't talk to anyone. I need my doctor to treat my case in complete confidence. Absolutely no one can know. So your social status is really appealing to me."

"Any doctor can offer you a patient-doctor confidentiality."

"You don't understand. Not even the hospital or the Hokage can have access to my records. And you are the only one that can get away with that."

Haji narrowed his eyes at the woman sitting in front of him. Why was she being so damn secretive about this? Maybe it was a reputation thing.

"Plus, you've never seen anything like what I have before," she added.

"Yeah, that's what they always say," he said with a roll of his eyes.

She proceeded to take off her sweater, and then unbuttoned her shirt.

"Hey what are you- " Sure, Dr. Yuy was a loud-mouthed arrogant man, but he would never tolerate a patient stripping in his office. He respected women far too much for that. But before he could stop Sakura from taking off her shirt, she had already pulled the sleeve below her shoulder and turned around with her back facing him.

"This. I don't think you've ever seen this." she said in a neutral tone.

She was right. Hajime Yuy was a specialist on ninja seals, but he had never seen anything like the markings on Sakura's seal. It was a legit seal, that much he knew, because it seemed like it was burned through all the layers of her skin. God, that must have hurt really bad. The marks were all foreign to him, and the only thing he could make out was a demon's mark. But it was a myth, wasn't it?

"I suppose that it's a forbidden jutsu that you so stupidly did," he said, the mockery and arrogance had been lost in his voice. He had only known few people who performed forbidden jutsus, and all of them were six feet under the ground.

"Life transfer." So that was it. It was no wonder that she looked like hell.

"If it's life transfer, then how in the world are you still alive?"

"Does this mean you'll be my doctor?"

"Does this mean you'll tell me everything?"

"As long as you don't tell anyone. Only you can access my records."

"Fine." It was indeed trouble he was getting into, but he couldn't resist the urge to know what happened to this woman who had a whole life ahead of herself but was now suffering.

So his patient told him about what happened in the battle against the Akatsuki, how she had developed a resealing technique for the Kyuubi container and actually performed it, and how her life energy had to be transferred to the said Kyuubi-container. Being the medic that she was, Sakura provided him with all her physical records before and after she performed the jutsu. At the end of the consult, Haji's hands were clasped in front of him, his mind obviously in deep thought.

"Five years, huh?"

"Yes."

"Why do you even want a doctor? You obviously know that you're gonna die. Once a life energy is transferred you cannot get it back."

"I'm not asking to prolong my life. I just need to do something, so that at the end of it all, I'll know that I did everything that I could to something out of the remaining four and a half years of my life. The chances of curing me are possibly nonexistent, but what we will find out more from my condition would certainly help in helping bijus like Naruto. Kami knows that they deserve a happy life too." The way she said it with all the acceptance and conviction, was all it took for the

handsome doctor to realize that Haruno Sakura was serious business.

"I see. So it's not for you. It's to improve the jutsu that you performed so that all beasts trapped in human bodies could be sealed properly without harming the ones who would do the seal." Haji closed his eyes, as if debating what to do next. Here was a patient, a dying patient, who doesn't want to be treated, but wants her system to be examined so that the jutsu she performed would be perfected to help others. And oh, no one can know about her condition. Was it even a doctor's job to do this? He can't even imagine the amount of pain she must be in right now and will probably experience for the rest of her short life. And she wasn't even inquiring on how to cure the pain. Maybe this woman was really on crack, just like the rumors said.

"I'll do this, on one condition."

"What is it?"

"You will let me treat your pain, and maybe in the future I can figure out a way to find a solution to your death sentence."

"But you already said - "

"No buts. My job as a doctor is to save my patient's life. And if you won't even let me try, then we don't go through with this."

He could see Sakura thinking for a moment, and then she nodded in agreement.

"Good." Once again, he closed his blue orbs and started massaging his temples. He hadn't spent more than an hour with her and she was already giving him a headache.

"Aren't you going to ask why I did it? Why I don't want Naruto and Tsunade-sama to know?"

"I don't have business with the relationship of my patients with other people. My only concern is the patient's health, well in your case, I don't know what to call it." This made Sakura giggle. This woman was trying so hard to seem happy.

"I'm also officially a civilian now, in case you're wondering. But don't worry, I'll manage a way to pay you."

"Don't worry about it. You won't have any official records for the hospital, so you won't have to pay the bills."

"Oh, but - "

"Just in case you haven't noticed, I'm a hotshot doctor, Haruno-san. I don't need money. I agreed to this because your case is a challenge. Money will not be an issue."

"It is an issue to me."

"Wow, dying *and* stubborn! Just the adjectives that I would want to describe my patients with! Look, I am your doctor now, so you'll not argue with me. We'll set up a regular appointment at my private clinic so you won't have to be seen going here in the hospital. Now please get out so I can think." The clogs in his mind were already turning, trying to figure out what meds would help her ease her pain.

Sakura stood up and he could see how she struggled to move. Something akin to pity churned in his stomach. He didn't ask why she did what she did, nor did he wonder why she didn't want this guy Naruto to find out. Because he already knew. The way she talked about Naruto gave the answer away.

People do crazy things for the people they love.

No one could really blame him for wanting to move on.

He was betrayed, lied to and manipulated by the one person he trusted the most. So his heart had learned and forced itself to close that chapter in his life that had everything to do with Sakura.

Ever since that day, the confrontation with Sakura and Sasuke, Naruto had refused to talk to Sakura. Days and weeks would pass by when she attempted to talk to him, but he would always just look disgustingly at her and walk away. Three months after that, he had finally had it and made Sakura promise to stay away from him.

"Look Sakura. If you really care about me, then you would let me move on and you would stay away from me for the rest of your life," he had said. A large part of him wanted to hit himself for saying such cruel things to her, but something would always just snap everytime he would see her.

"Is… Is that… what… you really… want?," she had replied breathlessly.

"Yes. If it were possible, I would forget about you. Forget I ever met you. Forget you ever existed. Cause that sure is hell of a lot better than dealing with what you did to me. Stay away from me, Sakura. Do you understand? "

"O… Okay." In that whole conversation, only one tear fell from Sakura's eyes. That was when she said that word and acquiesced to his request. Ever since then, she didn't come to see him anymore to beg his forgiveness. He never, not once, felt good about what had happened. But at least the pain that he felt every time he saw her didn't preoccupy him anymore. It just remained buried in his heart, locked away in a cage that he vowed would be forever locked.

He had immediately requested to be reassigned to another team, more like demanded. The Hokage had never seen his face so serious and adamant that she had to grant his plea for another team. His new team mates became Inuzuka Kiba and Hyuuga Hinata, as Aburame Shino had been promoted to jounin level ahead of them. It felt good to have a new normal team. Kiba enjoyed the occasional

bickering, but never insulted Naruto, in fact, he respected him. And Hinata never hit him for saying something stupid. In fact, she would openly laugh at his jokes and would treat his wounds with her tender hands. Yes, it felt good. But someone who was haunted by their past would never feel complete.

He still loved Sakura.

But love can grow tired.

Love can be distracted.

Uzumaki Naruto has changed. He spent all his time training, with his new team mates, with the frogs, with Kakashi-senei. He would train for hours until he wouldn't feel anything anymore. At first, nothing could distract him from thinking about the pink haired woman he was so accustomed to thinking of. But as time went by, he had learned to bury her deep within his being, until one day, he didn't think of her anymore. At least that's what he made himself believe.

By the end of his first year with his new team mates, Naruto had become head of an elite Jounin squad. His superiors and even Tsunade-baachan had been shocked when they learned that he could control the Kyuubi's power to its fullest extent. And it didn't cause any bodily harm.

"Amazing," the Hokage had said one day during his physical examination.

" It's like the Kyuubi is willingly lending you his power. And he's protecting you too.," she added.

"When did this change start to happen, Naruto?"

"I don't know. I think it was after I fought Pain. I remember really being burned by Kyuubi back then. But after that, everything was fine." He shrugged.

"Are you sure nothing particularly happened?"

"I'm sure. I was alone at that time," he had said with a particular pang in his words.

"It's like your system had been rejuvenated. No, more like, it's been strengthened to accommodate the Kyuubi's power at a steady pace. Looks like you finally won the Kyuubi on your side."

"I guess so." He didn't spend much time trying to figure out why the Kyuubi had finally agreed to be controlled. He had learned not to question. After all, if anything good came out of that final battle with Pain, it was his renewed physical tolerance and control over the nine-tailed beast's power. He deserved it.

With his ascension to being a Jounin, Naruto decided to take Hinata's offer on a date. By that time, his mind has almost completely blocked out the images of pink hair and green eyes. It was amazing as to what extent one can make the mind do. It could trick your heart into feeling numb, and it could even trick you into feeling an attraction towards a purple-haired, soft-spoken woman.

"You're in pain, Naruto," she had said. She stroked his cheek. Her touch was uncomfortable and foreign to him, but he welcomed it. It was time he moved on.

"I know."

She was a sweet and kind person, caring for him in the most endearing of ways. He would be crazy not to want her.

"Let me heal you," she had also said.

She couldn't do that. He knew that. But he didn't openly argue as Hinata touched her lips to his. He didn't fight anymore as he kissed her back. He deserved to be happy. And Hinata was a person who deserved to be, too. It would have to do. So inch by inch he built a wall around his heart. All the broken parts, he filled with Hinata's

frozen touch and invading kisses. Those parts that denied Hinata entrance to his heart Naruto had ignored. And it was like this, until finally, it had been a year, and they were still going out. By then, he was fully convinced that Hinata held his heart.

Everything was going along well. With his heart pseudo-healed and his body virtually indestructible, Naruto was an ANBU commander. He was feared by all the enemies and was loved by the people he showed compassion to, those who deserved it. Everyone knew that it would be just a matter of time before he would become the next Hokage.

After all that he's been through, everything was going to be okay.

He was ready to have his happy ending.

To be continued…

A/N Did you guys like it?

I do hope that it's long enough, considering the late update. Don't hate me.

Thank you for reading this fic. It means a lot to me. Especially in my times of sulking about the Sakura loving Sasuke thing. Haha.

And please do review. Make me smile. Thanks! Til next time. Ja!

Possibility

Hey guys! So sorry for the late update. I've been dealing with a lot lately. I mean, I was really swamped for the past month. But I've cleared up my schedule this month. So here is the next chapter. I also apologize if not much is going on in this chappie, but I was attempting to interweave some things, and trust me, this is necessary for the plot.

I'd like to thank those who have been reading this story, especially those who reviewed. Thank you so much! It makes me want to write more.

Anyway, here you go!

Chapter 6: Possibility

All generations need legends.

These are stories to hold on to in any case there were things that cannot be explained by pure logic. Ever since he was a little child, Haji Yuy never believed in legends. He thought it was childish to believe in something that old people made up to spice up what really happened in history. And he never thought for a moment in his professional life that he would one day rely on them as his last resort for any medical case that he had.

But that day came, along with Haruno Sakura.

As a doctor, he was never used to not being able to figure something out. So it really frustrated him that he could not deduce not one bit of useful information or any logical explanation regarding his current patient's case.

It had already been months since he agreed to take on Haruno's case, secretly at that. She had performed a resealing technique on the nine-tailed beast and had managed to rearrange Uzumaki

Naruto's whole system in order to accommodate a transfer of power between the beast and the vessel. Haji had looked and investigated on Uzumaki Naruto's current physical and chakra profile from his medical records in the hospital, and from the looks of it, everything was going well for him.

While his patient Sakura has been suffering slow decay in her body and fighting off pins and needles every single time she breathed because of her technique, Naruto was just perfect. He could now harness the nine-tail's power without damaging his body. And that was exactly what Sakura wanted - for Naruto to be able to have an extended life. But she expected that by the time she had completed the resealing technique, she would be dead, up in heaven watching over her beloved blond ninja. For some bizarre reason, she didn't die, not instantly of course. Which led her to Dr. Haji Yuy's door. Now that he was frustrated about what to do to help his patient, he was starting to regret ever letting Haruno Sakura walk into his office and demand a consult.

After several medical inspections, chakra profiling and six months of patience, Haji had little knowledge of what was happening with Sakura. Her chakra system was all messed up, that much he knew. He had never seen anything like it. Some vital chakra points, those which are directly intertwined with her vital organs had been destroyed, making her whole system weak and dying. Any other ninja with this kind of damaged system would die on the spot, but apparently not Sakura.

Sakura had insisted that they perform a full check up of her chakra paths first so they could figure out what went wrong when she performed life transfer. As much as Haji wanted to attend her pain problems first, she wouldn't let him, insisting that it would be a futile attempt. After all, she didn't come to him primarily to save her life.

" *We should do a full chakra-system inspection first. After we've figure it out, you can publish a ninja's medical journal about it. There must be a proper way of sealing beasts within humans. Without*

harming both the sealer and the seal-ee. You can only publish it after I die of course," she jokingly said once.

" *But I thought this was supposed to be a secret," Haji asked, his voice appalled by her ridiculous idea.*

" *Of course you won't be citing my name in the journal! You could say that this is all in the theoretical stage, no applications of it yet. It was just an idea you got from the concept of sealing beasts in humans. You can make up some gibberish like that."*

" *There are so many reasons why that idea is so stupid."*

And he had left it at that. Sakura was never going to stop insisting that they focus first on her stupid sealing technique. But he was starting to be afraid that they won't be able to do that with how the pain, both physically and emotionally, was slowly killing her. What she did was something that was tragically impossible, but she did it anyway. And with doing things like those, you can't really not expect a high price.

Giving up on whatever argument he had with what to deal with first, Haji started with Sakura's chakra profile and tried comparing it with the one she had before she performed her technique. That was what he had been doing for the past six months. Just like nerves in the body, there were millions of chakra points that could have caused her not-dying-on-the-spot thing, but currently, Haji had not found it. He had read everything that had to do with chakra and chakra systems, but nothing provided explanation for what was happening with Sakura. He had started thinking that he was overlooking something with her.

So out of frustration and utter loss of what to do, he decided to look into what Sakura mentioned about the deathgod, which led to him currently reading books on legends and myths about said creature. God, he had looked so stupid, crouched behind a book with silly pictures, looking like a boy who was reading fairy tales. But what choice did he have? All logical medical books were not helping him

one bit, so he figured he'd refresh his knowledge on old legends, because at that point, he would read anything that could have any bit of information which would help Sakura's case.

According to these legends, a deathgod only appears before those that have the strongest desire for his presence. He has the power to lend life, transfer life and even take it. But with these gestures would immediately entail death and banishment to the underworld. No person had ever come out of a contract with him alive.

Well, that was real helpful, Haji thought sarcastically. None of it made sense. If Sakura had really made a deal with the deathgod, shouldn't she dead by now? Sure, some divine intervention must have been happened for Sakura to be even alive now, but even if it were the deathgod who made it possible, why in the hell would he want to do that and give Sakura five more years to live? Sakura was not at all the most talented ninja, and she didn't have the genetic makeup of a strong clan that would make her system strong and capable of a highly forbidden technique, so why her?

Damn these legends.

It only added to the millions of questions that he had. He was sure that he was missing something. And also, there was also Sakura's condition. She was getting weaker everyday and it was making it impossible for her to live normally these days. If he doesn't treat her pain problems fast, it was going to get ugly. He couldn't help but shake his head in his annoyance.

"You're going crazy, aren't you? I told you it's not going to be easy" she said once during her visits in his private clinic. She was sitting on the examination table, her frail legs dangling on its side. It was really a surprise that she was able to move, let alone breathe at her state. She looked weak, but her eyes, these days, were gaining this sense of determination in them. He wondered why, but chose not to ask.

"I don't have time to be crazy. Besides, what I want to know now is whether any of these drugs are working on you," he answered while

administering some pain killers in through the veins in her arm. If they keep this up, there may not be enough veins in her bodies viable for injection.

"Hmm, I'm afraid not. It still feels my system's gonna burst anytime. Although the last one you gave me made me really woozy. I had to sleep the whole day.," she said with a voice of nonchalance. She answered in a manner of a child answering her mother's question of whether she liked cookies or not.

It annoyed him to no end that she was not taking her condition seriously. And Haji knew for a fact that she was always hiding her pain. Not once did she ever complain about it, and every time he asks whether any of the drugs he was giving her was working, she'd just shrug and tell him indifferently that they weren't. Not an ounce of pain betrayed her expression. And it just pisses him off. He was used to whining patients, not martyred ones.

"These are experimental drugs, aren't they?" she asked, eyeing the needles and foreign bottles from his medical cabinet.

He chose not to answer. He knew people from the black market and for the past months, he had been rekindling connections with them. With Sakura, if he was ever going to help her ease her pain problem, he would have to resort to experimental drugs. They had tried legit medications, but it had no effect on her. It was illegal for medical professionals to even consider treating their patients with experimental medication, but Haji was never the type to follow the rules. After all, he had a nonexistent patient, didn't he?

"I told you, I can handle the pain. You'd get in trouble with the ANBU if they find out."

"And *I* told you that I'm a doctor. I will help you stay alive for as long as I can. That's my job. And would you please stop worrying about me? I'm a far too valuable asset for the ANBU to be sniffing around my business." And it was not like he was lying. It was true. Even though the Hokage was not happy with his social incapacity and

arrogant nature, she never kept him on a tight leash. The least of his problems was his illegal bidding with the black market.

"Still…"

"Shut up already."

The last thing he wanted was for Sakura to feel like she was putting him in a compromised situation. He promised her treatment, damn it! And by all means, he will give it to her.

It was the least he could do, for he knew that he can never treat the hole in her heart. Which reminded him…

"You still think it was worth it?" he had asked before thinking. It was no question to him that she was likely doing to this for that Uzumaki kid, er, man. But with the length that she was willing to go to for him, she must have strong feelings for him. That much he knew.

It took a long time for her to answer.

"You bet." And for the first time, he saw her smile with genuine happiness. Her eyes looked like they had life, and her face seemed angelic.

"You're the one who's crazy," he just mumbled. He wasn't sure, but it was around that moment when he realized that he would do everything in his power to help her. All mysteries and legends be damned, but there was no way he'd let her die that easily.

"I'm gonna need an assistant for this, if you're gonna live longer, that is."

She giggled.

"I told you. I have five years. And didn't we agree that this would just be between you and me?"

"We're not even sure about that. And as great as I am, I'm not gonna be able to go through the materials and medical information on my own. Plus, I need someone to look after you. I can't have you vomiting blood all over the village."

"But - "

"No buts Sakura. Look, I'll find someone trustworthy. We'll still keep this a secret. You have my word." By the way he said it, he left no room for arguments. It was a surprise these days if ever he won an argument against Sakura.

"Just make sure she's not gonna be an ass like you."

"She?"

"It would be easier with our check-ups. And come to think of it, I could use some girl talk. I don't get to talk to anyone these days, well, except for the kids that I visit from the orphanage," she said, her eyes downcast.

"Alright then. A girl and not an ass. I'm sure I'll find her somewhere."

He had a lot of work to do. And for the first time in his life, failure was really not an option. He had to figure out first what was in Sakura's system that spared her life.

If Haji thought that his head has had enough confusion and nothing could even make things more complicated and dumbfounding, he was in for a the surprise of his life.

Exactly six months after Haji Yuy agreed to be Sakura's medical consultant, the Hyuuga clan decided to put a caged seal on her.

Hyuuga Neji had a love-hate relationship with his clan. He owed his unique eye abilities to his clan, and he will never regret having the ability to see more than what meets the eye. But everything comes

with a price, especially when he was not from the main house of the Hyuuga.

Being from the branch part of the clan, he never liked the fact that the people who are family would have the gall to put a literal cage on the others. He had resented the practice his whole life, ever since he was old enough to understand that family ties mean nothing compared to protecting power. But he was a very practical and reasonable man who kept his thoughts and feelings to himself. He knew that any type of rebellion, even if it did come from him, would not be tolerated by the Hyuuga. No one had ever stood up to the main branch of the family, and it would remain that way.

Neji accepted that, and pitied those who were from the branch family like him. He thought that they would just have to make the most of what they have and serve the main branch. After all, the current head of the clan, his uncle Hiashi-sama was by no means a cold-hearted man. He was just one who had the ability to see past through family ties and hold the clan's reputation and power the most important above everything else.

Neji was used to a life of secrecy and servitude. Because of this, he had become someone who knew how to keep a secret and had learned not to ask too many questions. But upon hearing the conversation of the elders of the Hyuuga, he could not help but have disturbing questions in his mind.

He had been assigned to escort Hiashi-sama that night with a meeting with the elders. Apparently, he had earned his uncle's trust enough to let him be even near the main branch of the family.

Every once in a while, they all convened to discuss clan matters and sometimes, marriages among the clan. But this was a strange and albeit highly classified meeting. For one, it wasn't held in the usual clan hall located in the middle of the Hyuuga properties, but instead in a secret chamber located after a series of spirals and locks that even Neji with his superb intelligence could memorize.

It was midnight, and by the time Hiashi-sama arrived with Neji, all the elders had been there, with their usual serious faces.

With Hiashi taking a seat in the middle of the room, Neji made to take his leave and guarded the entrance to the chambers. It was within a distance from where the elders were talking but not distant enough for Neji to not be able to hear. He made out some parts of the conversation, but obviously, his masters didn't seem to mind. After all, with the seal hot in his forehead, there wasn't really any real threat to what Neji could do with the information that he could gather from the clan. But at that instance, Neji noted by the tones of the voices that they were discussing a very serious matter.

"The remaining child of calamity has awakened," Neji heard his uncle say.

"… how can we even be sure of this?"

"Our oracles do not lie. They are there for this purpose only…"

"But it's not even possible. The strongest barrier has been laid upon that child," another said.

"Something strong has awakened it."

"Is it a threat?"

"At this point, no. The child is not aware of its power. And by what we gather, it is unable to deal with the strain of awakening."

"What should we do?"

"We could just let the power consume the child. The power will kill the child. As long as it is unaware of its power, no threat is posed."

"No," he heard Hiashi-sama say resolutely.

"We must nip this in the bud."

"Hiashi, you know that our clan does not murder with no cause."

After that, all Neji could hear was a bunch of murmurs.

"This is enough cause. If that child learns about its history and its power, it will be the end for the village, and our clan."

"It is not a crime, merely our way of protecting Konoha."

"What did you have in mind, Hiashi?" someone finally said.

"I have thought of a plan."

"Will you inform the Hokage of this?"

"No. She must not know. I would only… complicate things."

By the end of that meeting and as he escorted his uncle out of the chambers, he felt that something terrible was about to happen, and his clan, specifically his uncle, was going to be the cause of it. He had never heard of the child of calamity, but from what he gathered, this child must be powerful. Is it more powerful than the Kyuubi even? Or could they be referring to the junchuriki? Were they going to murder the child? His thoughts were interrupted by his uncle's voice.

"Neji."

"Yes, Hiashi-sama?"

"What do you think of Hinata's feelings for Uzumaki Naruto? They are together, no?"

To say that Hyuuga Neji was surprised was an understatement. His cousin Hinata, the heiress of the clan, had been dating Naruto for some time now. Hiashi had seemed indifferent with the idea, and it was the first time that the father asked about his daughter's feelings.

"Hinata-sama holds the highest affection for Naruto. He has come a long way and is now a strong and powerful shinobi. She cares for him deeply." It was true. For Neji, Hinata was someone who held little or no opinion about so many things. But when it comes to Naruto, it was obvious how in love she was with the blonde. He even felt happy for her when he learned that she had taken the initiative and asked Naruto out herself. And well, the rest was history.

"I see. Have her talk to me first thing in the morning."

"As you wish, Hiashi-sama."

As Hiashi-sama disappeared in the shadows, Neji, as calm and collected as he was, could not help but feel a shudder go through him. Whatever his uncle was planning, it was definitely going to involve Hinata and possibly Naruto. But never in his mind did he consider that it would involve Sakura.

"Are you people crazy? Are you out of your fucking minds?" the handsome doctor bellowed as his eyes grew fury by the minute. He had never felt so much anger in his life. At that moment, it was directed to Hyuuga Neji, who looked as guilty as he could ever be.

Haji knew damn well that someone must have hated him in the heavens. This must be his punishment for being such a social outcast.

It wasn't enough that he had to deal with a patient, a dying stubborn patient whose condition was not any clearer to him now than it was when he first learned about it. No, it wasn't enough. The Hyuugas just had to step in and put a freakin' caged seal on her. Why didn't they just murder her on the spot?

He had been reading scrolls in his private clinic when Hyuuga Neji showed up with a writhing and pained Sakura in his arms, a bleeding gauze wrapped around her forehead.

"They put a seal on her," Neji said as he laid Sakura on the white bed.

"What the hell for?" Haji retorted. He had heard of the sealing practice imposed upon the branch family of the Hyuugas. But he knew, for a fact that those types of seals were restricted to the clan members. It has never been done to any other person because it was extremely dangerous. A Hyuuga's body held a different framework than a normal person's, like that of Sakura's.

Haji could see that Neji could not answer. He could only help him stop Sakura from writhing too much and screaming her lungs out. It was like she was being exorcised.

"I'm burning! My head hurts! Stop it please!" she yelled. Her screams pierces every corner of the room.

Not knowing what else to do, Haji pulled the strongest sedative from his medical cabinet, doubled the dosage and injected the solution straight to her heart. It should have taken effect immediately but it took half an hour for Sakura's body to succumb to the drugs. It made Haji's blood boil, knowing that Sakura goes through so much pain as it is without the Hyuuga's help.

After placing an oxygen mask on Sakura, the furious doctor turned to the silent Hyuuga. He had heard of this man, a respected ANBU captain. It was a shame that their first meeting would be like this, with yelling and all.

"Are you people crazy? Are you out of your fucking minds?"

"I couldn't do anything."

"Of course you can't! Do you know how much drugs I've injected on her? That's enough to keep her in a coma for a month. You fucking Hyuugas think you can do anything you want don't you?"

This comment awarded Haji with a cold stare from the Hyuuga. It made him realize that he had to keep his anger in check. Cursing and yelling would not get him anywhere, and the Hyuuga probably was bound to keep his mouth shut. So Haji took a deep breath and attempted to start again, this time focusing on the essential questions to ask.

"What kind of seal?"

"It was the first time I've seen Hiashi-sama do. I haven't seen anything like it."

Great. Just great. That's what he wanted to hear. The Hyuuga continued to speak.

"But I know that they placed that seal on her to prevent her from thinking about Naruto."

"Wait, what?"

"A normal caged seal on a branch member of the Hyuuga restricts the person to the things allowed by the main family. In the event that one disobeys the rules like disclose the clan's secrets, agonizing pain is inflicted on that person. In Sakura's case, the only thing she can't do is think about Naruto or come near him."

"That is the stupidest thing I have ever heard! So they put a seal on her just so that your Hyuuga heiress could get her man all to herself?"

"No, something doesn't add up. Our clan will never go through such trouble if it was just about Hinata-sama's feelings."

"Then what is it about?"

"I don't know. And even if I did, I wouldn't be able to tell you anyway." Haji knew by then that it would be futile at that moment to dwell on the matter.

"If that seal is highly experimental, it could kill her Hyuuga." Haji warned.

"It is set to disappear after one year."

"One year?"

"Yes. Hiashi-sama it is enough time for Hinata-sama to fully capture Naruto's heart."

"If that Hiashi-sama of yours was even paying attention, then he'd know that a seal wouldn't even be necessary at this point."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I have another question. Did you force Sakura with this sealing?"

"No. She agreed."

"She agreed?" That girl was going to get in when she wakes up. How stupid can she be?

"Hiashi-sama laid out… reasons… to persuade her."

"What?"

"She is sick, isn't she?"

"I don't…"

"We only knew this because Hiashi-sama said that he had her followed for the past month. From the looks of it, she doesn't want anyone to know. And you're her doctor. Hiashi-sama also knew that you have been purchasing experimental drugs, which is a crime."

Haji's eyes widened at the realization.

"You used me to blackmail her into agreeing."

"Not just that. Hinata-sama also pleaded to her. She said she wanted a chance at a happy life with Naruto."

"How can your heiress agree to such a stupid idea? Doesn't she know that it could kill Sakura?"

"Hiashi-sama had led her to believe that it is a harmless procedure."

"You fucking - "

"I know. I don't agree either. But I had no say in the matter. Hiashi-sama had managed to cloud his daughter's judgment with her feelings for Naruto."

At that point, Haji had wanted to laugh at the stupidity of the situation. He couldn't believe that the Hyuugas would sink so low. But like Neji, he too knew that it wasn't just about romantic reasons that led the head of the Hyuuga clan to make a move on Sakura. Whatever it was, it was definitely enough to endanger Sakura's life.

"You don't know anything, Hyuuga."

"Tell me what's wrong with her."

"What?"

"Even before the sealing, she was more than sick, wasn't she?"

The doctor could only stare at the pearl-eyed man, pondering on what to do next.

He didn't know that the wheels have started turning.

To be continued…

What do you think? Oh my, it's crappy isn't it? Sorry. I'm not making Sakura suffer just for the heck of it. Trust me, better days will come for her.

Anyway, please do review. I wanna know what you think about this story. Do you still like it?

Til next time! :)

Cages

Hey guys! I'm back! So sorry for the late update. It's just that, I'm having summer classes right now and taking up Japanese lessons (Yey!). But I worked hard on this chapter and I hope it's long enough and I hope you like it. And your reviews really got me going. Thank you so much guys. Never fear that I will abandon this story, so just please be patient with me.

And yeah, I changed my name. :p

Now let's get on with this chapter.

Disclaimer: No, I don't own Naruto. Curse Masashi Kishimoto for thinking him up first.

Chapter 7: Cages

He was at a loss. For the first time in his life, Hyuuga Neji was at a loss. And he hadn't even bothered to hide it. Because Haji Yuy, Sakura's doctor, was too. Haji had told him everything - why she suddenly quit her shinobi status, why it wasn't even necessary to put a seal on her so she'd stay away from Naruto, and why she was, well, dying.

When Neji first met Sakura during the Chuunin exams, he thought nothing special about her. She was whiny, weak and held her teammates back. And he knew Sakura knew what he thought of her.

" *I know you think I'm weak," she had said after the third stage of the test.*

She had lost her bid to be a Chuunin that year from a fight with Yamanaka Ino whom he thought that time was just as weak as her. As for Neji, he defeated his cousin with ease. They, the genins were taking a break before the Sandaime met with them. Neji was sitting next to Sakura in the genin's hall. Her teammates were apparently

not with her. Uchiha Sasuke had been sent to the hospital and Naruto was probably checking up on Hinata.

" *I do," he hadn't even bothered to look at her when he answered.*

" *I don't mean it, you know. To be weak," he hadn't expected that answer.*

" *It's not like I don't try, but I'm not from some shinobi clan with bloodline limits," she said.*

" *Even Ino is from one. Everytime I even have the slightest indication of progress as a shinobi, everyone would seem to be a thousand steps ahead from me, especially my teammates. It's really frustrating," she finished with a sigh. She was almost tearing up.*

Neji didn't know why, but what Sakura had said made him grit his teeth in anger.

" *Bullshit. You are weak, because YOU are weak. You are weak because all you do is be Uchiha's fangirl. You are weak because you think you are better than Naruto, when EVEN he is twice the shinobi that you will ever be. You are weak because you do not grasp what it means to be strong. Do not ever blame it on everything else, especially your lack of a shinobi clan. You go around feeling sorry for yourself because you don't have a special ability that people from clans have, and it disgusts me." It had made tears from Sakura's eyes continue to stream down her pale cheeks.*

She didn't understand how hard it was to belong to a shinobi clan, with all the laws and the cages and rules of propriety and morality. Neji was a strong shinobi full of potential and yet he would always be caged by the confines of the Hyuuga. And here was this foolish girl blaming her weakness on her lack of clan, when all Neji wanted was to be freed from his. It was pathetic.

" *You shouldn't have even chosen to be a shinobi if that's what you think of yourself. And if you know that you are weak, then I suggest a*

change of profession for you before you hold your team mates back more and lose what little dignity you have." With that, he started to stand up and leave the weeping girl.

" *I'm sorry," she had said.*

" *Don't apologize to me. Apologize to all the people that you have burdened by being here," he coldly said as he walked away.*

Remembering that moment made Hyuuga Neji shiver from both remorse and an aching sense of pity. Back then, he was a cold bastard who didn't have the ability to relate to another human being. He hadn't cared about other people, and was filled with the resentment of his own clan. It wasn't until he had the chance to fight Naruto that he realized how messed up his life was. And ever since then, he had taken it upon himself to change. He never had the opportunity to apologize to Sakura for what he had said to her. But alas, apparently fate was giving him the chance now, when she is lying in Dr. Yuy's clinic bed in an induced coma. It made his heart clench in pain. Fate bites your ass like that.

If it wasn't for that clenching pain in his chest reminding him that he was in the real world and not in some twisted genjutsu, Neji would have never believed Dr. Yuy's explanation of her condition. She had been revoked of her shinobi status for almost half a year and the only explanation he got from the rumors surrounding what happened was that she just simply cracked under pressure. It was not a rare happening for some shinobi to snap from the demands and horrors of the kind of lifestyle that they lead. He even understood when he heard of it, and it didn't bother him one bit.

Sakura was a first-generation shinobi, and had not been prepared for the responsibility of protecting her village. Maybe she had decided to take it easy and just contribute to society the way a civilian would. That was what Neji thought. It was a good enough explanation for her disappearance in the shinobi world. And if the people close to her (the Hokage, Naruto, and Kakashi) were okay with what happened to her, then why shouldn't the rest of them be? It had put

all of discussions about her to rest. People and shinobi had their own lives and problems to deal with, especially during the time when the shinobi world had won over the Akatsuki. Everyone was recuperating and had more important things to worry about. Soon, no one ever talked about the pink-haired former medic.

He had never imagined that the rumors were not true, even if they were rumors. When he had demanded the truth from Sakura's doctor, Neji expected the type of truth that would state that she was sick of cancer or some natural thing that made people ill. But Sakura was dying not because of that. She was silently dying because of a forbidden jutsu that she performed to save her jinchuriki of a teammate. It made him realize how Sakura was just a misunderstood soul who only wanted to be strong in order to protect those which were precious to her. She had gone through lengths just to hide her disease from everyone so she would not be a burden. His fists clenched at the thought. It made him frustrated and oh-so-mad because of what his clan had just cold-heartedly done to her. The Hyuuga clan was now serving to thicken the barrier between her and Naruto. He resented the fact. For a genius Anbu with an elite status, he sure was useless.

"It's a good thing you're useless," the doctor said as they were sitting next to Sakura's slumbering form.

"I beg your pardon?" Neji said, turning to the equally long-haired man.

"You are useless because you can't tell any of this to anyone, especially not Naruto," he replied, with a serious expression on his face.

"How is that good?"

"Sakura would have my throat if you knew because of me and told people about her," he added with a chuckle.

"For you to not even inform Tsunade-sama of what's happening…"

The doctor pinned him with a glare.

"You should see Sakura every time she comes here and we attempt to treat her… condition. There would always be this look in her eyes that would tell you that she would rather have her limbs torn apart by a pack of wolves than to have her precious people know what she'd done. All I am ever able to do is grant what she wishes, which is secrecy. It's not right. I know that. But it's what she wants. And I would even bet you that if things were different and you *could* tell Tsunade and Naruto about her, she would be on her knees right now begging you with all that's left of her short life to keep your mouth shut."

It made Neji's jaw stiffen. This Haji Yuy sure was something. It was no wonder why Sakura had chosen him.

"Still…" Neji had managed to say in the end.

"I know," the doctor said, as if reading his genius mind.

"Don't think that this has not been hard on me too. For a doctor, nothing sucks more than knowing that no matter what you do, your patient will die in the most painful of ways. She doesn't even deserve this."

"What I don't understand is why Naruto and Tsunade-sama would not even bother with her suddenly dropping out of the shinobi business. It is unlike them, to leave her be like that." It really was a mystery to Neji, especially Naruto's indifference with his former team mate.

"Tsunade is the Hokage after all. She has a whole village to look after. If Sakura didn't serve her purpose anymore as a shinobi and her apprentice, then it was only proper to find another to take her place. Maybe like the rest of you people, she also didn't believe in Sakura that much. As for that Uzumaki, well, he has his reasons," the doctor quietly replied.

"Sakura is on her own now. It will be that way until her heart stops beating," he added.

They had stayed silent after that, both trying to process the gravity of the situation, the beeping sound of Sakura's heart resounding in the room. Even in her sleep, she looked pained.

"You know, for a genius, I thought by now, you'd be able to figure out why that Hiashi-sama of yours would do such a thing to Sakura," Haji said while checking Sakura's vitals.

"My uncle is a very complicated man. But one thing is for sure, his intentions are always for the good of the clan," Neji replied, closing his milky eyes and trying so hard to have a shred of logic in his uncle's actions.

"He only ever does to great lengths, and I mean resorting to unlawful acts, if it is for the clan or to eliminate a threat to it." That is why we have caged seals, he thought.

Haji Yuy sat in his chair, his brows furrowing with what Neji had said.

"What even makes Sakura a threat to your clan? Just because she's the first love of his daughter's boyfriend now doesn't mean Sakura can end the reign of your clan," Haji said, the sarcasm obviously lacing his deep voice.

"I don't' know. But he is up to something."

"Damn right he is," the doctor had managed to say. Neji could see that he was worried about his patient. The addition of the caged seal to her already deteriorating condition would only make things very complicated.

"Our main problem now is what we're going to do when she wakes up," Neji said.

" *Our* main problem?" Haji retorted. Neji could tell that the doctor was surprised.

"I'm in this predicament now. I am as involved in this as you are."

"How do I know that you won't be just a fucking spy?" Haji spat.

"My uncle did not order me to spy on Sakura. Hell, I don't think he's even worried about what happens to her now. As long as the seal in her stays for a year, he won't bother with her. At least that's what I think," he said while gazing at the girl's weak form.

"I'll do what I can to help, within my incapacities," he added, referring to his clan-bound curse to follow, above all, the Hyuuga's orders.

"Hmp. Whatever makes you sleep better at night," he heard the doctor say in contempt. If it were in any situation, he would've been offended. But his mind was in other things.

"We would have to start with another batch of chakra and physical tests. See how the seal is forced upon her system and how it affects her condition." It was surprising how Haji Yuy's voice had turned from one of contempt to one of a professional air.

"If the seal is just about staying away from Naruto, then we won't have any problem," the doctor added. Neji thought he was right. He knew, hell, the whole village knew that the blonde shinobi had not been communicating with Sakura.

"But what about the thinking part?" Neji asked.

"That's the tricky part. Maybe we can distract her, you know? Tell her that whenever she'd like to think of Naruto, all she'd have to do is think of an orange field, yellow sun and blue sky instead," the doctor answered, obviously trying to joke.

That earned him a confused look from Neji.

"Honestly, I think Sakura would be able to handle it. She has a strong mind. And quite frankly, judging by the amount of pain that she was already experiencing *before* the caged seal, a little more pain from thinking about Naruto would be quite tolerable for her at this point."

Damn, Neji thought. The world was really a fucked up place. It was going to be freakin' difficult from this point out. There were so many answers to find. And for Sakura's sake, they better find them soon.

"This is going to be a long year," he finally said.

A fleeting thought came to mind as he caught sight of a picture that was sticking out of Sakura's pillow. Earlier, he saw Haji put it there after checking on Sakura's pulse. The doctor had muttered something about it being something to chase the nightmares away, at least when she sleeps. Pulling it from under the pillow, he saw that it was a picture of Sakura and Naruto, with the training grounds in the background. They were standing side by side, Sakura with a happy smile and Naruto with a slight blush on his cheeks. It was downright sad to see what's happening now.

What would Naruto do if he ever knew?

One year later.

He knew. He knew that one day, it would come to this. What he didn't realize was that time went by so fast when you spend your life distracting yourself from the reality of your pain. And before you know it, you would have to make a choice.

The twenty-one year-old Naruto was sitting in his office contemplating the events of his lunch earlier with Hiashi Hyuuga. His head was almost hurting too much from thinking as he swayed his chair, not bothering with the paper work that he had to finish by the end of the day. He swore that the closer he got to the Hokage title, the more paper work it entitled.

Remembering what happened earlier made him feel sick. Even the way the head of the Hyuuga clan made him feel sick. It wasn't like Hiashi ever treats him badly. In fact, he is even supportive of his relationship with Hinata, whom he had been dating for quite some time. Hiashi had even made sure to include Naruto in the clan's numerous gatherings and meetings, so he could spend as much time with Hinata as possible. But the way he always looked at him made him grow uncomfortable with the guy.

It was a weird lunch, because only he and Hiashi, with his guard Neji were present. Hinata wasn't even there. Hiashi had asked about his relationship with his daughter. And as much as he wanted to tell the guy that it wasn't his fucking business, he couldn't. Long gone were the days when he had enough passion and guts to speak his own mind, not giving a damn about what others would think. Sometimes he missed that part of him. In fact, he missed many parts of him.

Naruto had informed Hiashi that things were going great with him and his daughter. By all logical standards, it really is going great with Hinata. They almost never fight, they protect each other in the battlefield and support each other in everything. And most of all, she loves him with all her heart. She provides him with physical warmth, and although through all the time they had been together, that warmth never reached his heart, he has willing to bear it. She loves him, and he knows it. As for him, love was something that he could never really give, not even to Hinata, because he had lost it a long time ago. Sometimes he knows that he's not being fair to Hinata, but he also knows that she knows that, and Hinata has enough love for the both of them. At least that's what he thinks.

Hiashi had nodded approvingly at his reply, and proceeded to start a conversation that Naruto would later consider as the turning point in his life.

"How do you propose to move on with your relationship?" Hiashi had said.

It took a bewildered look from Naruto and a long silence in the room before he had decided to beg the older man's pardon.

"I mean, when are you going to propose marriage to my daughter? " the older man stated.

He had to pause drinking his tea at the mention of marriage. If he was paying attention to his surroundings, Naruto would notice how Hyuuga Neji visibly stiffened and clenched his fists tightly at his side. Naruto heard Neji start to speak.

"If I may speak freely, Hiashi-sama. I think Naruto and Hinata are not ready for…"

"Silence, Neji," Hiashi uttered as he pinned him with a threatening look.

"Forgive my rudeness, Hiashi-sama."

The scene that had unfolded in front of Naruto was definitely unnerving. It made him realize how powerful the man in front of him was. A chill ran down his spine as Hiashi had resumed looking at him, expecting some kind of response from the blonde.

With a nervous breath, Naruto replied, "I haven't thought about it yet, Hyuuga-san."

"What is there to think about, Naruto? Surely you would've never been with her for quite some time if you weren't planning on marriage eventually," Hiashi said in a tone of authority, like the one a father would say when reprimanding his child and coaxing him to be guilty for something.

If he wanted to tell the truth, he would've said no, he wasn't thinking about marriage, no, he would not want to be part of their stuck-up clan and yes, he chose to be with Hinata because her cold and unpassionate touches make him numb on the inside. Better be numbed than writhing in pain, right?

Instead, he just hung his head in silence. When Hiashi had put it that way, any other defense on his part would be futile. No father, not even this one, deserved to hear that another man was using his daughter as a beautiful distraction. Naruto did not have the heart to do it. The best he could do was look anywhere but the older man's eyes.

He heard the head of Hyuuga clan sigh and said, "In two months time, Tsunade will throw a party and announce you as the next in line for the title of Hokage. I think it is the most opportune time to propose to my daughter."

As if he wasn't shocked out of his mind already, Hiashi produced from his pocket a brown velvet box and handed it over to him.

"This is our clan's engagement ring. Hinata's mother wore, and her grandmother wore it. It is usually not in our clan's law to marry out of our bloodline, but since you are the heir to the Namikaze clan, I will give you my blessings," Hiashi finished as he downed the rest of his bitter tea.

Naruto could only stare at the velvet box with so many thoughts swimming in his head.

"Thank you, Hyuuga-san. Now, if you'll excuse me. I have something I need to do," Naruto decided as he stood up from the table, hell-bent on getting out of that place as fast as he could.

"Naruto," Hiashi's cold voice reached him.

"My daughter has not loved anyone else in her life. She deserves to be happy. And her happiness will always lie with you," he said it with a different voice, almost that of a loving father. It served to complicate things even more.

As Naruto slid out of the dining room, he failed to notice the arrogant smirk that adorned Hyuuga Hiashi.

Now, in his room, Naruto contemplates on what the hell he was supposed to do. He knew that he owed Hinata so much. She had stuck by him when he was falling apart and stayed with him the time after. To be quite frank, when he was heart broken with Sakura, he would've let any woman in and have a relationship with her just so he would be distracted. But Hinata had been the one waiting in the wing. Everything would just be great if she didn't have a pushy clan.

He grunted and stared at the ceiling. Why wasn't it easy for him? Why was his heart not willing to let Hinata all the way in? She deserved his love. That was for sure. But his heart was being a stubborn piece of useless junk at the moment.

A knock on his door brought him out of his thoughts.

"Come in," he ordered as he heard the door already sliding.

It was not really his day, he thought, as familiar milky eyes greeted him.

"I am here to deliver the report on our last Anbu scout," Hyuuga Neji said, holding a folder in his hand.

Naruto had to admit that Neji had been way weirder than he was before, ever since he started dating his cousin. Every time Neji would look at him, it would be like he wanted to say something and couldn't. At first he figured it was just because he didn't approve of his relationship with Hinata, but he couldn't help but think that it was about something more, something more important.

"Ah yes. Thanks Neji," he said as he handed him the folder. He noticed Neji's eyes falling upon the velvet box on his table, the one that contained the engagement ring. It was too pompous for his taste, the rock on the ring being, well, too big and too shiny. He would've wanted a simple emerald gem to adorn the ring finger of the one he was going to marry. But that's out of the question now.

"You have a choice, Naruto."

"What?" Naruto asked, not understanding what the Anbu genius had said.

"You have a choice. Do not ever think that you do not have one, just because of my uncle." The Hyuuga was eyeing him intently. It was the first time that he thought Neji was telling him something true.

"I know. But Hinata deserves everything that I can give. Her father's right. She deserves to be happy." He sighed, figuring out what he's supposed to do.

"It would be unfair. For you to lead her to believe that your heart is hers."

"Excuse me?" Sometimes he thought that these Hyuugas could really read minds. Neji just remained silent.

"I am loyal to your cousin."

"Are you really?"

"You really need to leave now Neji," he said warningly. He was done with any of the Hyuugas today.

He saw Neji turned to leave but not before stopping to pause after he has pushed the door open.

"There are things in the past that will not remain in the past, Naruto. You need to take a step back from your life to see the damage that is looming over it." It looked like Neji wanted to add more, but closing his eyes, he just proceeded to leave.

It left Naruto confused.

What the hell is that Neji trying to say?

At the Hokage's banquet.

Gaara, Kazekage of the village of Suna, was bored. Social gatherings had never appealed to him. There were always too much pretentions and two-facedness that stank during these events, none of which Gaara had much use for. If it wasn't for the fact that it was Naruto's big day, he would have never considered going to the Hokage's banquet.

Naruto had gone a long way. And tonight, the Godaime Hokage had proclaimed him as the next leader of Konoha. His perseverance had finally paid off and he had managed to win the hearts of the people of his beloved village. For that, Gaara was proud of him. He was the one who changed his death-thirsty life, and for that, he is thankful.

The redheaded Kazekage moved from one table to another, along with Tsunade, greeting and catching up with the other village leaders. It was a tedious task, and an albeit annoying one, what with all the women eyeing him from head to toe and giving him appreciative glances. By the time they were done, Gaara was just itching to talk to and congratulate Naruto and he'd be on his merry-way. As luck would have it, the man of the hour finally showed up beside him in his table.

"Busy night, eh, Gaara?" the grinning blond said as he playfully threw a punch at the Kazekage's shoulder. His bodyguards behind him visibly stiffened, obviously not used with physical contacts with their leader, but Gaara just waved them off.

"Indeed," he said, a small smile creeping up his face as he took in the sight of his close friend. He truly had matured, but he would always be Naruto.

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to chat sooner. Hiashi-san just had to drag me and Hinata to meet up with old geezers."

"I know what you mean. I am exhausted myself." Gaara didn't fail to see Naruto unconsciously fidgeting in his seat.

"Is THE Uzumaki Naruto nervous and scared of this sea of dignitaries?" Naruto immediately cracked up upon realizing that Gaara had attempted to humor him.

"What? Naw," he said finally, after a long laugh.

"It's just that, this is the night when I'll propose." Gaara's features turned to one of confusion upon hearing his blond friend.

"Propose what? A toast?" Gaara said, his humor finally failing him. Surely he didn't mean…

"No. Propose marriage. To Hinata." If Gaara was shocked, he sure didn't let Naruto see it.

Gaara knew Naruto all too well. And if his first serious fight with Naruto was any indication of Naruto's feelings, he knew that the blond was head over heels in love with a girl, but not the violet-haired one. When he had first heard of Naruto and Hinata, he had figured that it was just a phase, that Naruto would later realize that as long as he hasn't let go of his former love, he could never be happy with anyone else. Not knowing whether to release a genjutsu or congratulate his friend, Gaara settled with a question.

"Is… this what you want Naruto?" Gaara was no expert on relationships, but it doesn't take a genius (even if he was one) to figure out that Naruto was doing things too fast.

"Do you remember when I fought you back when we were genin? You know, when you were all evil and stuff," Naruto said with a grin in his face. Gaara narrowed his eyes at him and nodded.

"I fought you, not only because I was trying to protect my village from invasion, but primarily because I wanted to protect the love of my life. At that time, all I could ever think about was getting her safe. Sakura… man I loved her. But she broke my heart. I have never seen her in years and I never want to see her again. And being with Hinata made me realize that life is way too short to be in love with

the wrong person. Hinata is the one for me. I might not feel for her, the way I felt for Sakura, but we're both willing to give it a try." Naruto finished with a sigh.

"Naruto, you can not choose who you love." Even through Naruto's explanation, Gaara remained unconvinced because he knew that Naruto should at least have the closure he needed with Sakura.

"I can sure try." This was the part where Gaara would just give up and let Naruto have his way.

"I deserve to be happy too, and not be heartbroken all the time," Naruto said as he tried to smile. The redheaded sand manipulator knew that he had hit a sore spot in Naruto by making him talk about Sakura.

"I know, Naruto."

"Well, showtime. I'll see you later okay?" Naruto said as he stood up from the table and made his way to Hinata, asking her to dance. Gaara figured he would propose in the middle of the dance floor. He truly wished for the blond's happiness, he really did. After all, he has been through so much.

The Kazekage decided he needed to some air and proceeded to the balcony which overlooked the Hokage's garden. Waving his bodyguards away, he gazed upon the stars and wondered why deep in his gut, he knew Naruto's decision was the wrong one. Was it some kind of jinchuriki sixth sense? His thoughts were interrupted as whistles and claps echoed through the whole banquet. So the idiot really went through with his plan. Deciding to return to the festivities, he moved towards the door, until a sight caught his eyes. Looking down from the balcony, he saw a pink-haired woman, with her eyes closed, leaning on an old tree.

He debated, whether to approach her or not. And as he turned around and leapt to the ground where the woman was, he wondered once more if Naruto had made the right decision.

To be continued….

So whaddya think? I'm taking my time with this story and I do hope the pace of it is not too slow for you. And Neji and Gaara are two of my favorite characters, so I thought I'd give them a spot in this story. Please please review. If I hit more than 100 reviews for the story with this chapter, then I'll post the next one a lot sooner. I'm not pressuring anyone though *evil laugh*. Let me know what you think. And please no flames.

Til next time! :)

Loose Ends

Disclaimer: If I owned Naruto, well, things would be different.

Please don't hate me? I know I promised I'd update sooner, but things have been so difficult in college, and yeah, I'm graduating so my schedule is all messed up. I really am sorry. But to make up for the long wait, this is a long chapter. And a lot of juicy things happen (giggling like Homer Simpson). I hope you guys are still there to read this story, cause I live for your thoughts and reviews. So yeah, I hope you like this.

PS. That Naruto anime episode on Hinata's confession, it pissed me off. So it kinda contributed on the delay for this chapter, cause I got kinda depressed. I'm sorry.

Chapter 8: Loose Ends

There are days we live

as if death were nowhere

in the background; from joy

to joy to joy, from wing to wing,

from blossom to blossom to

impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom.

- From Blossoms

A single light flickered in the dark room. Only two faces could be made out in the said room, both shrouded in silence. It was not until Hiashi Hyuuga opened his eyes that Hiro Hyuuga decided to speak.

"We are spreading ourselves too thin here, Hiashi-sama," the old man whispered. His voice laced with uncertainty betrayed his usually cool demeanour.

"Our duty is to protect our clan, and Konoha, above all else. This is not a matter of discussion. You know full well what will happen if that child learns of its heritage," Hyuuga Hiashi answered this time.

The man in front of him could not help but take a deep breath and realized why Hiashi was the head of the most prestigious and powerful clan in Konoha. Hiashi was not at all a predictable man in the way that he never wavered in his duties and did what he had to do for the Hyuuga family. That was not to say that he was cruel, it was just that he never had second thoughts in his actions, even if they did involve deception and manipulation. But in all the years that he had been part of their clan, Hiro Hiashi had never witnessed Hiashi to take such extreme measures. It made him shiver, the thought that one child could ruin all of them, and all of Konoha.

"You speak as if there is no other way to settle this matter, if we should consult the Hokage - "

"We will do no such thing!" Hiashi bellowed. This was enough to leave Hiro in a more nervous state than he was before.

" Tsunade has gotten soft. Just like the Yondaime. They both knew the repercussions of letting the Child of Calamity live, being too confident that the seal will not be broken by the Child's will. And because of that, we are left with this mess."

"The Hokage does not even know that the child has awakened," Hiro replied in a whispered voice.

"And she will never know." There was a finality in his voice that left no room for argument.

"We will finish this on my daughter's wedding day," he said as Hyuuga Hiashi walked out of the room.

"Before that day is over, that child dies."

The flicker of the candle's flame died as the night took its toll on the Hyuuga compound.

The pale woman opened her eyes to see the redhead Kazekage walk towards her.

"Sakura," he said. If it weren't for her now dull but still-pink-colored-hair, Gaara would have never recognized her. She was dressed in civilian clothes, and he even though it was not a particularly cold night, she wore like she was battling the winter time. He wondered what happened to the hard-headed medic who saved the life of his brother.

"Gaara, what bring you to Konoha?" she spoke in a hushed tone. She smiled at him, her eyes beaming despite how haggard she looked, and he realized that even though he knew something has changed with her, she will always be that girl that his blonde-friend fell in love with, once.

"I came here for the Hokage's banquet. What about you?" he inquired. He noticed how her eyes turned from beaming to thoughtful.

"Oh," she paused as if trying to figure out her answer.

"I was just taking a walk. I do that often these days. You know when I don't have a particular place to go to, I just close my eyes and let my feet take me wherever they want. I guess they brought me here," she said indifferently, her eyes flicking above her as if to note the celebration taking place.

"What's happening up there?" she asked.

"You are a civilian now," Gaara said, deciding to ignore her question, because frankly, he didn't want to be the one to tell her what was all

the festivity about.

"Uhm, yes," Sakura said, her eyes moving to look at the Kazekage.

"I guess shinobi life is not the one for me. I figured an early retirement would be good, " she added as she started to adjust her sleeves to better cover her cold hands.

Back in the days, Gaara knew Sakura as the fierce genin who wanted to protect her comrades. He watched as she became a valuable comrade and watched Naruto became engrossed with her every single day. When she saved Kankuro's life, he knew he was indebted to her forever for not letting him lose his family. She was a damn fine kunoichi.

But now, looking at her, it reminded him of his old self, one who never let anyone knew he was empty and miserable, only this time Sakura did a very good job of concealing it with indifferent smile. He knew she was hiding something, but was it his business to pry? That was not his job, if it were anyone's, it should be Naruto's, that blonde stubborn idiot.

"Sakura…" he started with a hesitant voice. She looked at him like she knew what he was going to say. It was like his tone was something that she was used to hearing.

"I don't know what happened between the two of you, and I am not in the right position to ask, but I owe you a great deal, and he is a dear friend. But - "

A deep breath stopped him from continuing his sentence.

"You say you owe me a great deal…" she said.

"Yes, I will always be indebted to you for saving Kankuro." Even though his family now was the whole Suna, his family in Kankuro and Temari would always be something that he would hold dear for the rest of his life.

"Then it is time to collect your debt," she said, leaning away from the tree she was previously holding on for support.

"I do not understand, Sakura." She just smiled. There it was again. It caused him to want to go back to the banquet and drag someone's ass outside to see what Haruno Sakura had been reduced to.

"All is ask is two things. One, you do not talk to him about me," she said with a sigh.

"And two," her eyes gave away this caring look, one that he his people in Suna always gave him ever since he became their leader.

"Please look after him, especially when he becomes the Hokage. He's going to need help."

"Do that for me, and you will owe me nothing, Gaara."

He clenched his fist as he could feel his sand stirring not in violence, but in frustration. If there were any doubts in his mind about Sakura hiding something, that speech of hers did the job of erasing them.

"Both of you are being stubborn," he finally said after calming his appearance.

"If I fought for him… He would be unhappy. That's why, if only for him, I would stop fighting."

Before he could ask her what she was talking, Gaara heard footsteps approaching them.

"Sakura."

Hyuuga Neji was the last person Gaara thought he'd see. But more than on his presence, he wondered why Sakura's features seemed to calm down and became peaceful at the sight of the said Hyuuga.

"Neji, you're here too?" she said with the familiarity that he could only associate with two bonded people. As far as the redhead knew,

Sakura and Neji were never more than two comrades, but seeing how Neji was acting towards the woman, he couldn't help but re-evaluate his thoughts.

"You shouldn't be out on such a cold night, Sakura." Cold? It wasn't cold at all. Neji did not even acknowledge Gaara's presence save for a bow to the Kazekage. Neji took two steps towards Sakura. He looked like an overprotective father. The redhead wondered if he considered him to be a threat to the pink-haired girl.

"I was just taking a walk, Neji." Gaara watched as Neji's features changes from calm to worried. With his lips forming a thin line, he turned to Gaara.

"Kazekage-sama. If you do not mind, I will be taking Sakura home now," the Hyuuga said as he took of his coat and placed it very carefully around Sakura's shoulders. Gaara did not miss the way Neji seemed to soothingly rub her arms after placing his coat on her. Sakura, for her part, welcomed the gesture as she released another breath and leaned towards the Hyuuga.

As they started walking, Sakura turned to Gaara and touched his hand. She was so cold. Too cold, given the almost hot weather that night.

"We'll be going, Gaara. It was good seeing you. Really good," she sincerely said.

"And I hope you'll do what I ask." She walked away, with Hyuuga Neji wrapping his arms around her, as if to support her to move.

He watched as the two forms disappeared from the light of the shining moon.

What was happening here?

Like he predicted, it really was a long year. And for the months after that, every moment seemed to be crappier than the last, and it pissed Hyuuga Neji out of his wit.

His frustration reached its peak as he was there in the banquet when Naruto, that insensitive moron, decided to propose to his cousin. In reality, it wasn't really Naruto he was angered with, but with himself. He felt useless to stop this seeming insanity that was going on in the world. He hated the fact that he couldn't say anything to anyone, that he couldn't just smack Naruto in the head and tell him to wake up, that he would not be able to stop Sakura from hurting because of this.

As he clenched and unclenched his fists, he left the phony festivity and found Sakura and Gaara talking. He was surprised to see the girl there in the first place, much less for her to be talking to one of Naruto's close friends. He was worried about her, and her slowly worsening condition. He had to make her rest. That's when he decided to accompany her home.

He placed his hands around her shoulders as they walked, fearing that she might suddenly faint. The first time it happened, he nearly had a heart attack. He was not one to take chances anymore.

"I'm fine, Neji," she said in a tone that let him know that she was annoyed with his attention.

"I do not understand why you don't just let me carry you." It would definitely be easier.

"I want to walk. It's the only thing you and Haji would let me do these days. Besides, I'd die sooner if I spend more time in bed." His features tightened at her ineffective humor. With death, no less.

As if sensing his reaction, Sakura tried squeezing the hand on her shoulder.

"Neji…" she said, trying to apologize.

He just shrugged and proceeded with walking.

"We have to get you home."

No one could blame Neji, really. He had promised himself to stay by the girl's side to make up for the horror his clan put her through, and for a year, he watched her suffer different kinds of hell.

The past month had been exceptionally rough for her. After hours of breathless arguments with her Haji Yuy, her doctor, Sakura had managed to convince him to stop with her treatments. Neji had protested too, but she would have none of it.

" *Just take it out please," she said, referring to the catheter that was attached to her left arm and was surgically connected to her left chest.*

For the past months, Sakura had been bedridden with Haji Yuy's insistence with her treatment. Neji learned from the doctor that after the caged seal disappeared, the girl's body had developed symptoms akin to leukemia, a cancer of the blood. He wasn't entirely sure if it was cancer, but he was sure that there was poison in her blood. Dr. Yuy had feared that it significantly shortened her remaining lifespan.

With coaxing from the doctor, and also with Neji's adamant insistence, Sakura agreed with drug treatment. She spent the past months lying in bed in Dr. Yuy's well-equipped clinic. Neji visited her every moment he could.

The drugs did help her, but it also meant that she grew very weak and unable to do anything but sleep. Soon, Sakura grew restless and pleaded to stop with the treatment.

" *Sakura, if we stop this, you will have only months to live. If we stay with the procedure, maybe we can operate and - "*

" *I don't want to die here. I want to take walks and visit the kids at the orphanage. I want to die living," her raspy voice interrupted the doctor's appeal to sanity. She was lying in bed just after one of the sessions. And after having thrown up countless times because of the drug's effects, she wasn't willing to go through it again.*

" *Neji, please tell me you're with me on this," her pleading eyes stared at him.*

During the time that Neji had spent with Sakura and her doctor, he had grown protective and caring towards the girl. He watched everyday as she tried to heal her own pain and pretend that none of what she felt mattered. He knew that Dr. Yuy saw it too, and even he was trying everything he could to save her, no matter how futile it looked. They had developed a weird kind of friendship. And for some reason, Sakura trusted both Dr. Yuy and Neji.

Neji walked towards the bed and sat beside Sakura, who was now touching the catheter attached to her arm, ready to pull it out. Before he knew it, he reached out and held her hand, wanting to plead to her.

" *Sakura, you know what's going to happen if we do this."*

" *Yes, I would only have a few shorter months," she said matter-of-factly.*

" *We don't want that," he said.*

" *You know I'm done for either way Neji," her unsteady voice unsettled both him and the doctor.*

" *I appreciate what you both have done for me. You two have been my unconventional family for the past year and I love how in a short time, both of you have cared so much about me." It was true. Sakura had claimed a part of his heart. It wasn't because he pitied her, but because in her, Neji found a strong-willed person.*

" Seriously, I wouldn't last this long if it weren't for you two. But I don't want to die this way. Not when I know I can still live normally. Please, you have to understand. Please Neji? Haji?" she said, squeezing his hand back.

After what seemed an eternity, Neji heard a heavy sigh from the doctor behind him. Sakura had won this argument, yet again.

" Is there still some way you can medicate her?" he asked Haji. The doctor had grown accustomed to his presence.

" Yes. But they would have to be milder and would have weaker effect." Neji watched as Sakura gave the both of them one of her rare genuine smiles.

" Then you'd just have to keep looking for better medication," he replied.

" Hey! You're not the boss of me, you arrogant prick."

" You're one to talk, you prick," Neji said, annoyed with the handsome doctor's outburst.

That's when they heard it. Her laugh. She was laughing, something she hadn't done in a long time, not since she started the treatment. Neji looked at her, silently asking what the hell was funny.

" I'm sorry. It's just that I feel like I'm the sick dying daughter, and you're my bickering parents." Sakura always knew how to lighten the mood. Must be a trick she learned to use, ever since she learned of her condition.

Neji had to admit. He really felt like he was with family whenever he was with her and the annoying doctor. That was something he never felt when he was in the presence of a Hyuuga.

He smirked.

" Haji's the mother, of course."

"You know that I'm worried, Sakura," he said as he opened the door to her little apartment. She had moved from her former apartment in the central in order to avoid Naruto's possible routes. It was another *suggestion* from the Hiashi Hyuuga. Neji had protested this, but Sakura just acquiesced. It was too small and located in the darker, more dangerous part of the village. This was why he would rather have Sakura stay in the doctor's clinic.

"You don't have to be," she said as she walked to the couch. Neji walked to kitchen and took a glass of water and gave it to her as he joined beside her on the couch.

"You were at the academy again, weren't you?"

"Yeah." Neji learned that whenever she could, Sakura would stop by the swing in the academy and stay there for a couple of hours. He had a suspicion that she was waiting for someone to come, but he never confirmed it with her. After all, it was already pointless. Both he and Sakura knew that.

"What was going on in that party?" she asked.

"It was to announce Naruto ascending as the Hokage in a year." He tried to not talk about him with her. He only ever talked about him whenever she asked.

"A year? That's too long." He knew what she was talking about, that it was too long, because she wouldn't be around by then.

It made his heart break whenever he sees her expression when they talked about Naruto. That man was not the boy that Sakura loved anymore. And for that, he didn't deserve her.

"He proposed to Hinata-sama."

"Oh." That was all she said. He didn't know if it was for closure or something else, but something made him tell her the truth.

"Sakura - "

"You know, he asked me to marry him too. He gave me this chrysanthemum and said 'You should marry me, Sakura-chan'… I punched him for an answer."

"I'm going to bed now. Thank you for walking me home as usual, Dad," she teased. Sometimes he really did feel like a father, but one who was bound to lose his child.

She stood up and walked to her bedroom.

"I'll visit you tomorrow."

"Sure."

The door closed.

The morning after the Hokage's banquet, Uzumaki Naruto woke up with a headache and a heavy painful feeling in his chest. He opened his eyes to see violet hair sprawled across his chest. Then he remembered that he had proposed to the woman in bed with him.

Said woman stirred awake, noticing his unsteady breaths.

"Morning, honey," she breathed, pressing her cold lips with his and running her hands through his locks. He noticed the oh-so-obvious glimmer from her ring finger - the engagement ring. The one that Hyuuga Hiashi had given him.

He suddenly wanted to go back to sleep and not think about it. But he couldn't. He closed his eyes and suddenly remembered something.

Finding his voice, he said "I have to meet baa-chan today."

Extracting his arms from around the woman, he left the bed and quickly went to the bathroom. The woman was left to twist herself in

the sheets.

"Oh, what about?" she called from the bedroom.

"I dunno. She didn't say," he said as he started to brush his teeth. He looked at himself in front of the mirror and saw a man staring at him. He had bags under his eyes and he looked like shit. Yep, that was him.

He didn't understand why he felt… well, not happy. He was getting married. And he should be dancing around the house for that matter, not trying to bail out of bed from his fiancé.

"But you'll join me and my father for dinner won't you? We have to discuss wedding plans," the woman called out again. Shivers went down his spine at the mention of his future father in law.

"Uhh, of course. I'll just see you at the compound," he said as he emerged from the shower and put on dark pants and a gray shirt. As he was putting his forehead protector in front of the bedroom mirror, the woman's hand found their way to his waist. His breath hitched, whether in a good or bad way, he didn't know.

"I miss you already. I wish you wouldn't go. We should spend the day together. After all, we just got engaged." He could see her milky loving eyes in the mirror, and suddenly it made him nauseous. Naruto closed his eyes and counted to ten.

"I know. But you know Baa-chan. She's going to castrate me if I don't show up," he said trying to change the topic. He moved to disengage from her and got ready to walk out the door, but her hand held on to his arm. He turned to look at her.

"Hmm, you're right. But hurry home, okay?" she said as she smiled.

"Okay."

"I love you," she shouted.

He pretended not to hear.

"Hey Baa-chan. Sorry I'm late. I was - " Naruto was interrupted as he saw the look at the Godaime's face. She looked, tense.

"Tsunade-sama, is something wrong?" He only ever addressed her formally if something was wrong. And that seemed to wake the Godaime Hokage from her stupor.

"Oh, Naruto. I didn't notice you come in." She turned to shuffle the papers in order to cover the previous one she was reading.

"Right." Naruto was unconvinced.

"Why are you here?"

"Man, you are getting old. You summoned me, remember?" Exactly how many bottles of sake did she drink last night. He would have a talk with Shizune later.

"Oh, right. Come with me," she said as she stood from her chair and went out of the office. Naruto followed her.

The Hokage led him to the distant part of the tower, where access was restricted to only the head of the village. He had never been there before and it made him wonder.

"Ne, Baa-chan, where are we going?"

"Just shut up and follow me," she said as they descended to a staircase. One by one, candles were lit as they went down.

Finally, they stopped at a wooden door. For some reason he didn't know, Naruto's heartbeat raced against his chest.

"We're here because someone wants to see you."

"What? Who?"

"I'm warning you, Naruto. I won't allow violence here." What? Was this an enemy who wanted to see him?

Before he could ask her, the Hokage moved to open the door.

It was pitch black inside the room, and the only light source were the candles from the staircase.

As Naruto adjusted his eyesight to the contrast between the dark and the light, what he saw made his breathing stop altogether.

"Sasuke…" He narrowed his eyes to the person inside the room, the person he once called brother, but tried to denounce almost three years ago, along with Sakura's betrayal.

"He came back two nights ago with his team. The others are being held in the interrogation unit, but for safety reasons, I kept him here," the Godaime stated, her honey eyes not leaving Naruto, as if checking for his murderous intent. Sensing that there wasn't any, she decided to speak again.

"I'm going to give you a few minutes to talk, but I warn you, one punch from either of you and I will have both your heads." With that, Tsunade proceeded to the staircase, leaving Naruto to enter the room.

Sasuke sat on a lone long stone bench in the middle of the room. He too, was looking at the man in front of him. From Naruto's perspective, he looked, at peace, no murderous chakra, no sharingan, just his plain black eyes. But that didn't mean that Naruto trusted this man.

"Long time, dobe," he said.

"Yeah." Lame answer, but that was the only thing he could say. He was getting restless standing, and in order to avoid Sasuke's gaze, he decided to sit beside the man. He didn't know why the logical part

of his brain shut down at that moment, but Naruto knew he had to ask.

"Why'd you come back?"

"This is home."

"Don't pull that bullshit on me." Both of them just stared forward, not trusting each other's gazes.

"This is part of a deal," Sasuke finally stated. Naruto had to snort at that. He didn't know what deal he was talking about, but he wasn't buying it.

"I swear if you're here to destroy this village, I'll - "

"I'm not." Short answers made room for more questions, but before Naruto could ask another, Sasuke beat him to it.

"Where's Sakura?" Naruto's blood boiled, so he took a breath before answering.

"Wouldn't you like to know," he spat.

"The Hokage told me that you weren't talking to her. Why?"

"None of your fucking business."

"You love her."

"Shut the hell up!" he shouted as he stood up, anger lacing his voice.

"You don't know anything. No matter what I did, she always loved you. She manipulated me, used me, to get to you. How can anyone love such a horrible person!" His heart ached, because it hurt him too much to remember what she did, but Sasuke needed to understand how both of them broke him.

"But still, you do." Sasuke kept a steady stare at him. For days and days after the incident, Naruto asked himself what the hell he did to deserve such cruelty from Sakura. He felt hatred for Sakura and Sasuke, but something told him that Sasuke wasn't in on Sakura's betrayal, that part she did herself.

"Fuck you. She betrayed me and still she didn't get you. She got what she deserved." Finally calming his nerves, he sat down again.

"I don't love her the way you do, Naruto." As stupid as it might sound, it was the first nice thing that Sasuke had ever said to him. He didn't even know why. Naruto just had to chuckle.

"You're still an idiot," Sasuke said.

"And you're still a fucking bastard."

Tsunade made it in time to hear those words, and despite her apprehensions, she knew that these two brothers would learn to repair their bonds.

She was on the swing again. She didn't have enough strength to push her legs from the ground in order to swing, so she just settled to just plain sit on it.

After Sakura learned that Naruto was going to get married, she didn't know how to feel. But either way she knew that she only wanted him to be happy. That's why when she saw Hyuuga Hinata approach her, she couldn't feel hatred towards the woman.

"Hinata-san," she said, acknowledging her presence, and noticing the glittering jewelry that adorned her ring finger.

"Sakura-san. I knew I'd find you here."

"I heard about the news. Congratulations," she tried to smile, but decided against it.

Hinata had been the one who made her agree to the caged seal of the Hyuugas. In her, Sakura saw a woman whose only wish was to be loved by Naruto. Hinata was someone who would never hurt him like she did, and for that, Sakura was thankful.

"Sakura-san, I want to apologize. I'm sorry that things did not work out between you and Naruto. And I'm sorry that I'm happy that it didn't work out. Because if it weren't the case, he wouldn't be marrying me." The poor woman was in tears, and Sakura understood.

"As long as you keep him happy, I will bear no grudge against you. Please believe that, Hinata-san. And do not cry, Naruto doesn't like it when people cry." He definitely did not. It was the reason why Sakura never cried too, ever since he made her promise to stay away.

Deciding to change the subject, she asked "When is the big day? Don't worry, I won't gate crash," she joked.

"Two months," Hinata said, still looking guilty.

"Hinata-san, don't feel guilty. He chose you on his own. No one forced him. You are the one meant for him." Hinata's eyes softened as she heard those words and bowed to Sakura, a gesture of gratitude.

She didn't have to thank Sakura, really.

She didn't have to.

A/N What do you think? I told you. So many things happened, I just hoped that it doesn't seem crammed up. I want you guys to get hyped up, because the next chapter will be… dun-dun-dun-dun… the wedding. Bwahahaha!

Please review. They make my heart swell.

Ja ne! :)

Breathe

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto, who by the way was very very cute when he was a baby. Kawaii!

So, this is a relatively fast update, compared to my last ones. I've been really busy but you guys were really awesome leaving your reviews and all, so I thought I'd make you happy. You guys are the best. Thank you so much for reading my story. I hope you like this.

Please review after.

Anyway, enjoy!

Chapter 9: Breathe

I don't get much from heroes

I don't give them much thought

I crumble under pressure

And may you still have love

I don't like my reflection

I don't like what I see

I'm scared of my own shadow

You cast this doubt on me

But am I still the one?

Am I still the one?

Am I still the one?…

May 14, Present Day Konoha

He walked briskly to the darker part of the village as his robe moved along with the cold morning air. Event the sun which was starting to come up could not light the gloomy street. He was not particularly fond of taking long walks, especially at a place considered the slums after a full-day shift from the hospital, but today he was making an exception. He watched as the scene changed from pristine and lively to a deeply sullen and almost disturbing sight. He passed by bars and brothels from which ashamed drunkards and exhausted whores with dishevelled features were just coming out of. The houses were old and looked like one huff from a wolf would bring them down. Even the people- beggars and workers alike, were depressing to look at. He hated this part of the village, and hated it more that Sakura had been living in it for the past two years. Haji Yuy was definitely annoyed.

The Hyuugas had her move there in order to avoid any of Hinata or Naruto's route, after all, the pair had been living in a not so modest apartment on the other side of the village. Sakura, of course, the idiot that she was, agreed so as not to create any trouble. She had managed to rent a dingy apartment that was not fit for a sick person, or any person for that matter. Haji and Neji had disapproved of course and engaged in a verbal battle with her. But she insisted (more like whined and stomped her foot like a little girl) that it was her place now, and she was going to live in it. She even cared to point out that it fit her civilian's budget very well. Haji had only gritted his teeth and wondered how two people as stubborn and stuck-up as Neji and himself could never win any argument against her. He had gone through pains to make Sakura spend less time in that apartment and more time in his clinic, which had more space and furniture than her little dirty abode. And he had a feeling that soon, Sakura would have to permanently stay in his clinic for medical attention. But he refused to think about that now.

He hastened his pace as Sakura's apartment came to sight. It was on the second floor of the last building in the neighborhood. Today, he was checking up on her, both as her doctor and as his family. Because it was the day, the day Uzumaki Naruto would be marrying Hyuuga Hinata.

He climbed up the stairs, careful not to let the wood creak too much and crumble under his feet. It was very lucky that Sakura was such a lightweight or else the weak stairs would have been ruined a long time ago. He proceeded to her door and brought out a key from his pocket. Sakura had given Neji and him a copy of her keys, because sometimes when they visited her, she was too deep in sleep or too tired to hear the knocks from her visitors. Granted, she never did anything physically strenuous, but she was always tired. This fact made the doctor and Neji, the only Hyuuga he trusted, very nervous. It was funny, really. Haji had promised Sakura to take on a girly non-ass assistant to help with her case but in return Neji, the ass came along. Most of the time the two didn't get along, but they both agree on Sakura's well-being.

He turned the key, opened the door and found Sakura humming in her small kitchen, probably making tea. She was still wearing her thick robe. With her back turned to him, she poured tea with careful precision. Honestly, he expected someone in her position to be moping around on a day such as this one, but not Sakura. She had managed to surprise him ever since they met. The way he saw it, she was a strong person. Stupid and masochistic most of the time, but strong all the same. All this time, she never gave him or Neji any reason to think that she was weak or needed anyone's help. Neji had said once that maybe because when she was young, people considered her weak. She was tired of it. Despite her condition, she was never depressed and made the most of her now domestic life. She relearned playing the piano, visited the kids at the orphanage, read tons of books at the library, learned to bake, took up pottery, everything she could to keep herself busy, she did.

" *I don't want to just sit here and do nothing. I know I can still live even with a hole in my heart. I'll be damned if I don't try.* " That's what she said one day when Haji and Neji found her in her apartment crouched over a lump of spinning clay. She had learned pottery that day and gave the two of them matching tea cups. Then she baked them cookies with strawberry icing on top. She tried to be strong. But they all knew, even Sakura, that all of she did were poor replacements of what she could have had if she didn't sacrifice her life.

" *It's not like I'm going to live long without him anyway,* " she would say. Self-sacrificing, stubborn, overly optimistic, dying. Yep. That was Sakura alright.

"Good morning, doctor," she greeted him with a smile. Whether it was real or not, Haji didn't know these days. He took in her form, pale white and skinny.

"Would you like some tea?" she offered.

"No," he finished with a sigh. Her one-bedroom apartment was small and dark with few furniture. He could cover her whole apartment in ten strides. There was a couch, only big enough to accommodate Sakura's lying form. It was convenient when Sakura didn't have the energy to make it to her bed. In front of it were a small table and a small television, a gift from Neji. Save for another small cabinet case in the living room, that was it. She decided to leave her other belongings in her parent's house.

Finding a spot on her couch, Haji decided to sit down. Sakura joined him.

"I'm surprised no one has robbed your place," he said. Goons and low-lifes were known to hang on this side of town.

"Nothing's worth robbing here. Not unless you can sell all those medicines and syringes at the cabinet. Plus, Neji hangs around here

too much I think he scares off people. You know him," she answered. Thank Neji for that.

"Soooo… you look tired," she commented.

"I know. I was up for twenty four hours. Whiny patients, even more whiny nurses. God, they're all annoying. Plus, I have another shift this afternoon," he said with a groan. She giggled before sipping her tea. But honestly, she looked more tired than him.

"You should have gone straight home. My appointment's not until tomorrow, you know," she said. They were checking how her kidneys were this time.

"I was checking up on you. You know, to make sure you didn't kill yourself or anything like that," he said, getting to the point.

"Come on. You know I'm not like that," she said, trying to make light of the conversation. He knew that she knew why he was there. Silence filled the room for a long time after that, save for the sound of Sakura sipping her tea. They had both grown accustomed to each other, and silence never bothered them anymore. Then she started to talk.

"I'm not the first one to have a heartbreak," she said as she finished her tea.

Not that kind, he thought.

"I mean, even if I could compete, I wouldn't win. He wouldn't choose me now," she added. He snorted at the comment.

"I'm serious. I mean, look at Hinata-san's boobs." She said it so seriously and that did it. Before he knew it, Haji was laughing so hard Sakura couldn't help but laugh with him. Sakura wasn't someone who would wallow in her own sob story. They were both aware of it.

"I'll be okay, Haji. In fact, I have a whole list of things to-do today," she said with a very sincere look in her eyes.

"Oh, really?" he said unbelievingly.

"Yes. I'll go visit the kids at the orphanage, buy some groceries, and probably take a walk." By taking a walk, she meant stopping by the academy. It was something that she did religiously.

"I'm surprised that annoying bastard's not here," he commented, referring to Neji.

"He stopped by last night. He said he won't be able to visit, since all his clan are attending the wedding," she answered.

"Oh."

"Don't strain yourself," he warned, changing the subject. For someone with her complicated condition, she was still fairly strong. Her episodes come and go, but today she looked fine, for the most part, that is.

"You know I won't. Now, get out of my apartment, eat some breakfast and get some rest, Haji," she ordered.

"No, I'm too tired. I'll just crash here at your couch." It was true. But more than that, he wanted to be around Sakura even for a little while, before he returned to work.

"It's uncomfortable here," she argued. Haji had made it fairly know how he hated her place.

"Trust me, I've slept on worse." The couch where he crashed in his office was worse. He had a suspicion that one of the snooty nurses he had yelled at once were ruining the springs on it.

"I'll be gone when you wake up. I'm leaving early," she informed as she stood up.

"Fine," he said already leaning his head on one arm of the couch.

"Hey Sakura, before I forget, I finished it," he mouthed out as he was yawning and stretching his arms.

"Really?" she asked, walking back towards the couch.

"Yeah. It's not much, but at least we got some results." He pulled out a scroll and handed it to her. It was what they were working on for the past two years. It was their original plan to figure out the chakra pathways that were involved in the sealing. After hundreds of sessions, Haji and Sakura had managed to map out the pathways that Sakura used during the actual sealing and cross-referenced it with the ones that were damaged after it. Sixty percent of the pathways that were completely damaged were the ones which Sakura had used, obviously. Thirty were damaged as an after-effect of the sealing, while the remaining ten that were deeply entwined with her major organs had only been partially damaged. That was what kept her breathing. For a shinobi who constantly used chakra, pathways were as important to their system as veins that carried blood to the whole body. Since not the whole chakra system had been destroyed in Sakura, she was able to live after the technique. When Sakura performed the resealing, she knew exactly where to make her chakra flow in order to produce the most chakra, in effect opening the gates. Now that they knew which pathways were which, all that was left was to analyze and conclude on which pathways had the best shot whenever a technique like that would be done.

"It's a bit choppy," he said regrettably.

"No, it's a start. Thank you." She looked happy. She really did. After reading the scroll, she handed it back to him.

"Look after it for me," she asked.

"Actually, I also have something for you." She pecked his cheeks and proceeded to her room. She came back with a thick paper in her hand.

"Here," she offered him. It was another cheque, her payment for the treatment she receives from him.

"I told you I don't need that," he said, refusing to take her money. She gave him money regularly like clockwork, and time and again he would profusely refuse.

"Why do you always whine when I pay you? Stop being so stubborn," she said, shoving the cheque in his shirt pocket.

"Look who's talking," he muttered as he faced away from her. Sakura worked as a ghost researcher for the Konoha Research Institute and it had managed to give her an income however unsteady. Haji had seen what researches she had done whenever she could, and if anyone asked him, he'd say she was heavily underpaid. But that was how she managed to pay him. But Haji, for his part, never cashed any cheques she gave him.

"Sweet dreams, Mom," she teased.

"Shut up already," he half-angrily retorted. Why was he the freakin' Mom between Neji and himself anyway? Neji definitely had the thicker and longer hair. And he nags more, the unbearable jerk. He heard a faint chuckle from Sakura and decided it was not the time to argue with her about that.

Soon enough, exhaustion took over Haji. His eyes started to droop as he heard rustling from Sakura's room. He closed his eyes and it was not long before he slept comfortably, his dreams overwhelmed with images of a sullenly smiling Sakura.

As she was leaving the orphanage, Haruno Sakura felt how refreshing it was visiting the children. The place was located just a few blocks from her street so she frequently visited it. It made her sad the first time she visited them. Most of children were orphans of shinobi parents, while some were left there after their birth. It made her think how she could do worse than what she was going through.

At least she knew how it felt to be loved- by parent, by friends, by Naruto, even for a short while. But these children were born alone, unaware of what it meant to be important to someone other than themselves. Despite that, no one can deny that these children still treasured whatever innocence they had left.

One little girl, Yuuki, had an Anbu mother who died on a mission when she was three. She never talked to any of the kids in the orphanage and always cried. Then there's this boy Shin, no one knows who his parents were. He liked bullying other kids and stealing their old crummy toys, but whenever he's alone, he also cried. It took time and patience for them to open up and connect with Sakura, but she had plenty of them in her hands. It was not before long that they became close to her. Now, whenever she came Yuuki would start smiling and Shin would latch on to her side the whole time. The rest of the kids liked her too. She played some tunes for them on the little piano they had on the play room and they would sing along to her music. They also liked it when she read stories for them. They called her Sakura-chan and it made her happy.

One boy however, loved her the best. His name was Shouta. He had beautiful blue eyes that drew her in the moment she saw him. He was a quiet boy but when she's around, he smiles the widest. He was actually the first one she got to know among the children. He loved giving her flowers and asking silly questions and making witty comments.

"You're skin is as pale as that of Snow White's, Sakura-chan. Why is that?" Shouta once asked while she was playing the piano. She just laughed and told him it was a secret and nobody was supposed to know.

"Well, I like it anyway," he said with a wide grin and then kissed her cheek. It was the sweetest thing anyone had done to her in a while and it made her wish that someday, that boy would find someone worthy of him.

She loved every moment she spent with those kids. It made living a lot more bearable. It made the pain a lot more bearable. She thought of children as she walked through the streets, intending to go to the grocery. The usual bustling streets of Konoha was unusually empty today. But of course, because a grand celebration was taking place. Sakura felt she had a lot more freedom roam the village today. Before she knew it, her feet had taken her to a place she had never been in a while. Somewhere she would never imagine she would go to by herself, mainly because she didn't like eating there unless *he* had dragged her in there.

She was standing in front of Ichiraku Ramen.

Mizuno Hayate was bored. He leaned his head on his forearms and resisted the urge to sleep the day away. There was not much customer today, and he was alone to man the ramen place. His lovely wife Ayame and his father-in-law had coaxed him (with puppy eyes, mind you) to watch things for them while they attended a wedding. Apparently, it was a big event around here. Ayame and her father were close to the groom, and so were more than half of the population of Konoha. But, business was business, so he had agreed to watch over Ichiraku Ramen. It was going well, and by well, it meant that business was unusually slow today. Why go to a Ramen eatery when there's a free fancy buffet over at the Uzumaki-Hyuuga wedding, right?

It was high noon and he let his gaze roam around the place, neatly cleaned with empty tables and a still heating ramen broth on his side. Save for a couple of foreigners who checked out the place, Ichiraku Ramen was really empty. Maybe he should close early, he thought.

His thoughts were interrupted as he heard a gentle rustling ahead. Wow, a customer. Hayate let his eyes wander to the stranger. She was a thin woman, her cheeks looked like they could use some blood and her eyes (were they green?) seemed unfocused. She wore a turtleneck and a sweater, and it looked like she was cold,

maybe a little sick. But she had a certain beauty to her. He had never seen her here before. He had only started helping out at Ichiraku Ramen three years before, after he married Ayame. Honestly, he disliked ramen at first, which explained why he never stopped by. But after he met Ayame and fell in love, he decided to let go of his dislike for the food, if only for his wife. Soon, he had grown accustomed to it and even learnt the art of cooking one. He had grown to love the place.

Maybe she was a visiting foreigner, Hayate thought. But for some reason, she seemed to be strangely familiar to the place, faintly touching the chairs and taking her time looking around.

"Ano, can I help you?" he asked, approaching the woman.

"Aah, yes," her eyes flitted to him, as if she was unaware of his presence before.

"I'd like to ask if you still honor ramen coupons," she said, taking out a piece of crumpled paper and handing it to him.

It looked old and as if it had been wet somewhere. It was dated almost four years ago. He hasn't seen this kind of coupon. He looked at her and saw her eyes with a hopeful glint to it. It changed to embarrassment.

"Someone gave it to me a while before. I was just, uhm, wondering if it still has value. Anyway it's okay if - "

"No, no, no! Of course we accept them here. Take a seat," he offered, taking out a chair from one of the tables. He didn't know why, but the woman looked sad for someone who had pink hair. He wanted to cheer her up, give her some company even.

"Uhm, thanks," she replied while taking a seat. She tucked on strand of her long hair behind her ears.

"I'll serve you a bowl. Please wait," he said with a smile. She smiled back.

As he returned with a steaming bowl of ramen, she was still looking around, as if trying to remember something important. He set the food down in front of her.

"Thank you," she said. He took a seat across the table. There was no other customer anyway, might as well start up a chat.

"Are you from around here? 'Cause I haven't seen you before," he inquired. She picked up the chopsticks and rubbed them together.

"Ah, yes. I just don't normally go here anymore. It's not my… route," she answered, as if trying to pick her words carefully.

"Oh. So you're from Konoha. 'Cause I thought you'd be one of the foreigners here today, 'ya know. Here to attend the wedding and all."

"Not really. But I heard there was a big wedding."

"Man, it must be the biggest event here ever. Ayame-chan and Oyaji are guests. Do you know Uzumaki-sama and Hyuuga-sama?"

"I… not really. I don't go out that much. But they seem to be very popular."

"Yeah. Uzumaki-sama comes here a lot, sometimes with Hyuuga-sama. What a nice guy. Actually told me to call him by his first name, but I guess I can't shake of the honorific. I bet he's gonna be the best Hokage ever," he said, rambling.

"He sounds very kind," she commented while carefully taking the noodles between her chopsticks.

He continued.

"They're the perfect couple, I tell ya. They seem sweet to each other. I've never heard them fight whenever they come here. I heard she

was his first girlfriend, and at first she was vey shy to even talk to him when they were kids. But I guess love works in mysterious ways, ne? 'Cause now they're tying the knot! " He didn't realize that he was going on and on about the couple until he noticed the woman get this distant look on her face. He tended to be very self-absorbed in a conversation sometimes.

"I'm so sorry, Ma'am. I was rambling like an idot."

Her focus was brought back to him.

"Oh no. Not at all. They really are great with each other, right?" She smiled.

"Uhm, you seemed to be thinking of something else. Hehe."

"Your story just reminded me of something. I guess I made the right choice after all…" The last part she whispered. She took a sip of the broth.

"Uhm, pardon?" he asked.

"Nothing," she smiled.

"Uhh, okay. How about you, you got a special someone?"

She was silent after that, playing with her food and looking at the ground.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry. I just figured you could use some small talk, 'ya know. A pretty lady such as you shouldn't look so sad," he said apologetically. Hayate was the type of guy who would strike up a conversation with anyone, that's how he made friends. But he knew when to stop.

"Oh. No! I was just… I mean, I don't have any… And I'm not really sad. I just feel a little under te weather. It's very nice that we're talking. It really is," she said. She sounded sincere, so he grinned in return.

"Well, if that's the case, then I'm sure that special someone's just taking his time getting to you. There's always someone for everybody," he said. What a romantic sap he was. Ayame was always telling him that.

"That's… very sweet of you. Thank you. So much," she said, laying down her chopsticks on the table.

She stood up and straightened her sweater to her arms.

"This is… the best ramen I ever tasted. Thank you so much," she said gratefully, handing him some bills.

"Oh, no no!" Hayate protested, waving his arms in front of him.

"We do accept your coupon. On the house," he said. It didn't seem like she didn't have money or anything. But it seemed that something about that coupon held a value for her. He didn't really want to be the one to burst her bubble.

"In that case, thank you again. And also for the chat. It was… enlightening." she said.

"And say hi to Ayame-san and her father for me," she said as she walked out of Ichiraku Ramen. By the time she said it, he was already returning to the kitchen with the unfinished bowl of ramen.

Wait. So she knew them?

"Wait, Ma'am! I didn't get your… name." He tried to follow her. But she was already gone.

Her beautiful long hair flowed smoothly under the comb of the hairs stylist. Her heavy coloured lids fluttered open as she reached her hand to her chest. She was nervous, but in a good way, and her red lips curved into a smile. Today was the day. She was the luckiest woman alive.

Naruto had chosen her. She could not believe that he chose her. It took a lot of patience and some work. But finally, she could call him hers. Though a part of her heart regretted that it took Sakura's heartbreak for Naruto to have him, she couldn't bring herself to be sorry for what was happening now. It was Sakura's loss, and her gain.

Hyuuga Hinata loved Naruto enough to want to make him happy, no matter what it takes. She had loved him since childhood and admired who he had become. She was fervently jealous of Sakura, because she held Naruto's heart once. By then, she decided that as long as he was in love with her, she would never interfere. But when she learned of what Sakura had done to her dear Naruto, she was furious and angry. How could someone manipulate someone like that? Naruto was deeply heartbroken and all Hinata wanted was to heal him. It motivated her to protect him no matter what, and it gave her the courage, the idea that maybe it was time to put Naruto's heart back together. No matter what it took.

She had tried. And Naruto let her. Now, here they were. She had to compromise some things, but in the end, it was worth it, right? Right. All she did was make sure, plead even, that Sakura would not interfere anymore, because it caused Naruto the greatest pain. And Sakura agreed. No need to think about it. She didn't need to feel guilty. No, not guilty. She should be happy. Not bothered.

She shook her head and focused her eyes on the mirror, where a woman in the most elegant white dress stared back at her. She promised Sakura one thing- make him happy. She definitely would.

"Hinata-sama," a voice interrupted her thoughts. It was her cousin, dressed in the traditional clan robe. He looked handsome, but really tired.

"Neji-nii," she acknowledged. In his hands were flowers arranged in a circle which he handed to her.

"My bouquet. Thank you," she said, smiling. She smelled them, they were sweet. Neji just bowed his head and proceeded to the window, looking out.

"You seem tired, nii-san. Has father been working you that hard?" she said. She was trying to make small talk as she walked back to the mirror. The stylists and her bridesmaids had left the room while she fixed her wedding train. Half an hour was left before the ceremony started. She needed some water, she decided. As she was about to call for a servant, she heard Neji breathe a deep sigh behind her.

"He was always weak with genjutsu," the man said, his back still turned to her. She faced him, ready to inquire what he was talking about.

"Nii-san, I don't…"

"It was a Hagaishin Technique, wasn't it?" She froze at his question. Did he know?

"It's a secret technique passed to our clans for generations, a useful countermeasure during a wide-scale attack. From the word, *hagasu,* which meant to detach or disconnect. One casts in on the enemy in order to break any bond or personal connection he has with his team mates, distracting him. After that, we attack and the enemy wouldn't know what hit him." Finally he turned to her, his eyes cold and serious. It scared Hinata.

"He always had a deep connection with Sakura. When I was in a mission with them once, and Sakura was in danger, Naruto felt it in his gut and he come to her aid. We were hundred of meters away, but Naruto had managed to find her. You could say that it was his instinct to know if she was in any kind of distress. I think I have the same connection with Lee and Tenten."

"What are you trying to say?" she said defensively.

"For a span of six months when you first dated, I noticed how you would always touch his left temple and your finger would linger there for a while. It was very subtle, the way your forefinger you touched him with was laced with chakra. One would mistake it as a romantic gesture, but you were never that touchy, considering you were a shy girl on a budding relationship with Naruto. It was very clever." he started walking towards her until her was inches away from Hinata. She was balling her fists.

"I didn't know our Hagaishin technique could work like that. Perhaps it was an experiment at first, wasn't it, Hinata-sama? But after months of continually feeding him that technique, you saw some results. Naruto never spoke or thought about Sakura after that. His connection with Sakura disappeared. And he became increasingly wrapped up in your finger. It was the effect of a continuous genjutsu. Tell me, do you still touch his temple like that?" Neji's tone was so accusing it was almost physically painful to hear him talk.

"Stop it," she sobbed, pushing him away.

"It was for his own good. Thinking of Sakura make him hurt. I was trying to help." She really did try to help, because seeing Naruto devastated was unbearable.

"For his own good? Or for your own? What right did you have to severe his connections with anyone?" he hissed. He looked disgustingly at her. Hinata felt an invisible pain at her chest, as if someone had shoved a kunai at it. Was she really that selfish. She was crying.

"I love him."

"This isn't about love. We both know that." She was now sobbing uncontrollably.

"Hyuugas were always known to manipulate and use power in order to get what they want. I honestly you were the exception, Hinata," he said, without the honorific.

"You're going to tell him?" she asked.

"No. It's not in my dirt to tell."

A loud knock could be heard from the door. Hinata frantically tried to wipe her tears away, her eye liner already running. It took all her will to steady her shaky voice as she called.

"W-who is it?"

"Hinata, it's me." Her breath hitched as she recognized the voice. Neji had returned to his spot on the window, his eyes narrowed.

"Na-naruto… I…"

"Look, I know I'm not supposed to see you until the ceremony but I just wanted to tell you something. So I'm just gonna say it here outside. Listen "kay?" he said. He had the most amazing voice for her.

"O-okay," she answered, still trying to stop her flowing tears.

"Look, I know I haven't been fair to you. It's like all this time, you've been carrying the weight in this relationship. I know it seems that most of the time, my mind seems far away whenever I'm with you. But… but you stay, and you never complained. And you're so patient."

"Naruto, you don't- " she couldn't finish her sentence as he continued.

"I know that I'm a piece of work. And I was broken when we really got to know each other. But I think I'm okay now. What we have now might not be the love you were always dreaming of since you were a little girl or love that makes me forget my name, but I'm willing to give it a try, Hinata. I guess what I'm saying is, thank you. And if you'll have me, I'll be waiting at the end of the aisle."

This made Hinata cry even harder and Neji ball his fists his knuckles were white.

"Uhm, baa-chan's calling me now. So, uhm, see you." She heard his footsteps as he stepped away from the door.

Forever seemed to pass after that moment. She felt sick to her stomach.

"Think about how unfair you're being, Hinata," said an angered Neji as he walked towards the door.

"I'll send in the make-up artist to fix your face," he said as he closed the door.

The music was playing this sweet melody as she saw the last bridesmaid walk away for the aisle. She was facing the door which would open momentarily to show the bride. Her hands were in the arms of her father who looked as serious as ever.

Half an hour ago, she was sure of what she wanted.

Half an hour ago, she was ecstatic to spend the rest of her life with the man she had loved forever.

Half an hour ago, she did not feel the least bit guilty.

But everything's changed.

The door opened and Hinata walked down the aisle with tears streaming down her face.

The sea of people mistook it for tears of joy.

To be continued…

A/N Sooooo… did you like it? I thought I'd give some perspective from Sakura before the wedding, you know? I didn't want her to seem like pathetic sick person who mopes around all day. I think she is very strong, and she tries to live the best she could, even without good 'ole Naruto.

Anyway, I hope I'm not asking much when I ask you guys to please leave your thoughts and reviews. Pretty please?

Til next time.

Ja ne!

Uninvited

Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto. But I'm sure he misses me.

Okay, so this is late, I know. But I need you guys to know that whatever happens, I will be updating this. I just have so many things going on in my life. There's been a death in the family, and it was really hard not just on me, but with everyone in the family. Plus, I have tons to do with school. So I just need you guys to understand. You have given me so much support with the previous chapters of this story, and I really appreciate it. I just hope that if ever I come late with updates, you guys will still be waiting and reading them. Anyway, enough with this. I hope you enjoy this.

Chapter 10: Uninvited

The memory of you emerges from the night around me

The river mingles its stubborn lament with the sea

In you the wars and the flights accumulated

From you the wings of the song bird rose

In the childhood of mist my soul, winged and wounded

Lost discoverer, in you everything sank

This was my destiny and in it was my voyage of longing

And in it my longing fell, in you everything sank

It is the hour of departure.

- A Song of Despair

It would pass, she repeatedly thought. She wiped the already drying blood from her mouth, her hands with the sleeves of her sweater. She forced her heels to stay on the ground as she struggled to get a grip of the swing. The sun was at its peak, high noon already. When she was in the academy, she used to love high noons. She would run around the playground, trying to catch her shadow. Now, its warmth had never felt so fatal to her, so she closed her eyes and decided to take comfort in the wind. Sakura knew that today, everything would change permanently. If she ever got through today, she knew that the rest would be easier. Going away would be easier. Death would be easier.

She felt the familiar ache in her lungs. Throwing up blood was not something she thoroughly enjoyed. She had never gotten to being used to it, despite having routinely experienced such nuance for the past three years. Her episodes would come and go, and it has gotten significantly worse. She tried to rub the spot in her chest which ached the most, failing to soothe it. But that was only because the pain was not caused by her episodes. Thinking about how at this very moment, her best friend would seal his bond with another, made her feel a certain kind, of well, she couldn't give it a term really. Maybe it was a type of despair, or final realization. Either way, she knew that all she could do now was be happy for him. And happy, she was, though not enough.

She straightened her covered legs and watched as it make a vertical shadow beneath her on the grass. She tried not to remember the look on Naruto's face when he told her to go away. He was genuinely angry, his eyes had this look of disgust and his mouth formed a form straight line, as if telling her that there was no chance for them anymore. He was more than disgusted at her, he felt betrayed. She had two options then to deal with it. One, she could grovel, apologize and beg for him to forgive her. Or two, she could let him go. Telling the truth was not an option. Maybe she really was a bad person, for she chose to lie. Seeing him so hurt that day made it easy to make her choice. It was by far the hardest decision that she had to live

with, and it was more painful than any of the things she had gone through for the last three years when she became sick.

Seated on the swing, she took a deep breath and tried to smile. The wind was sweeping her long hair now. At least now she knew that Naruto was going to be alright. He was now surrounded with people who love and respect him. That fact made her worry about him a little less. Lately, she had realized that leaving him was really for the best. She could not imagine how it would hurt Naruto more if he knew how sick she was. He was a kind person like that. It would've distracted him from reaching his goals. She would not permit it. She knew she had this battle to herself. Even now when was losing, she was at peace knowing that she would never burden her precious people again.

It really sucked, having these realizations now. Had she known earlier in life how much she had inflicted pain on Naruto and everyone else she cared about, she would have tried to change and mind more the feelings of others rather than herself. Had she known that chasing a ghost half her life was something she was not meant for, she would have stopped. Had she known that the person who loved her the most was the one in front of her shouting "Sakura-chan! Let's eat some ramen today!" every day, she would have loved him sooner. These regrets come and go as she thought about it, but what good would it do? That was the one thing she did not like about her current lifestyle, she had too much time to think.

That was enough thinking for today, though. It was time to go home and take a long nap. She intended to sleep the rest of the day, so tomorrow, she'd wake up and hear the news of how the Hokage-to-be and Hyuuga heiress' wedding had gone without a hitch. Neji would definitely check up on her tonight. She did not want him to worry more about her.

Pushing her heels, she gently stood up while holding a grip on the rope of the swing. Her vision was becoming blurry. That wasn't good. She had to get home soon. She planted her feet firmly on the green grass and started walking but was immediately interrupted. In front of

her, the wind rustled a set of leaves. Then the wind became suddenly strong, blowing around her like a small tornado. She closed her eyes while her arms covered the front of her face. The wind almost knocked her down so she tried to hold on to the swing. As the sound of the rustling wind stopped, she carefully opened her emerald eyes.

She coughed whatever dirt had gotten to her mouth. Standing a few meters away from her were two forms clad in dark brown clothing. Shinobis? She couldn't tell. They were now approaching her. Her breath hitched as one of the two forms unsheathed something from his back. A dagger.

It was like time had stopped for Hyuuga Hinata. The walk down the aisle, her father's grip on her hand as they walked together, and Naruto's peaceful face as she approached him. All of it seemed wrong.

It was like there was a heavy weight on her shoulders that refused to leave. In front of her was the man she had always loved, the man who promised he'd marry her if she'd have him. His love was the one thing she wanted to have. And yet, what Neji had revealed to know about what she did was eating her conscience.

Tears were still running through her cheeks. For the first time, she wondered if it were really a good thing for Naruto to be apart from Sakura. She had been the best friend to Naruto that Hinata wanted to be for the longest time. Ever since Naruto had been without Sakura, Hinata watched as she went into a deep depression. He would always train, almost destroying the training fields in her rage. He would smile, but it was not the kind anyone would buy to be true. It was obvious how angry and hurt he was. She believed then that enough patience would eventually get him out of his reverie, and that in time he'd be okay, with her preferably. But now, seeing the disappointed face of her cousin who was standing next to her fiancé, Hinata thought she is a fool for ever believing that she was the one

who could heal him. She had only served to complicate things for him. She had only led him to play a game of pretend.

What was worse was what she did to Sakura.

" *You love him, don't you?" her father asked as he sipped the warm tea in his hands. The seated Hinata, fisting her hands on the fabric of her pants, answered meekly.*

" *I do, Father."*

" *Then this is the only way," Hyuuga Hiashi replied, intently looking at his daughter with a firm authority of a clan leader.*

" *But father, I can make him love me myself. He cares for me and…" Her answer was interrupted by her father's abrupt standing.*

" *Do you think you are enough? Do you think it is enough that you have him now?" It hurt her to realize how much her own father doubted her. Her eyes started to water as she could not answer the older Hyuuga.*

Her head remained bowed as she heard her father's footsteps approach her. She was taken completely aback as her father bent down to her, his hands reaching out to tip up her chin and made her look at her.

" *Dear daughter, I am only looking out for you," he said in a low voice. At this, her tears had started falling.*

" *If he is the one you want to keep and he is the one you want to be with for the rest of your life, then it is my duty to make sure that he becomes yours." She did not know how to react to such an unusual speech from her father. He continued.*

" *We must work together to keep him away from those that confuse and hurt him, don't you think?" She could not do anything but to nod at her father's question.*

" *Do not worry. It is a harmless procedure. We shall only proceed with it when she agrees." She knew that whatever her father's words were will be followed anyway. He tolerated no amount of defiance, that she knew.*

But at that moment, with what her father said, she felt like she was his daughter that he was really trying to protect. There was no harm in believing in the better possibility.

After that conversation with her father and the head of their clan, Hinata had agreed to place a special seal on Haruno Sakura. Despite having known so little with this new procedure, she took the word of her father that it would only serve to keep Sakura away from Naruto. Her father had been the one to present to Sakura the proposition, and according to him, she surprisingly agreed. She would never forget their conversation on the night before the sealing.

" *Sakura-san, I hope you understand. I need a chance with him. I would never get a fair shot while you're there," she wanted to continue, but it seemed that Sakura had not been paying attention, having this dazed look on her face. Hinata heard a deep sigh from the girl sitting in front of her.*

" *The way he looked at me last time…"Hinata could see how her mind had drifted away.*

" *If it would make your heart and his at peace… then I guess there's no other way," Sakura finally looked at her, her mouth turned upwards like a small smile.*

" *Promise me, though. That you will never hurt him the way I did." It was a subtle plea.*

" *Yes, I promise."*

" *Then that's all I can ask for."*

What she didn't know back then was that the one thing she promised not to do was what she was doing right now. She had deprived him of the power to choose.

She was shaken as she her mind was brought back to the ceremony. The priest had been calling her name. Apparently, he had been wanting to get some sort of answer from her.

"Hinata-san, are you okay?" the priest asked worriedly. Hinata looked around to see her father's stern look and her fiance's confused one towards her.

She could not answer.

A warm hand found its way to her wet cheek. It was Naruto's. It was always him. It was terrifying how much she loved him. It terrified her more what she had done.

"Hinata, don't be so nervous. I'm here," he said. Those eyes she fell in love with, they were boring through her with such care. But were they real? Or just the effects of her genjutsu on him? She couldn't tell. She took another deep breath.

"I think she's ready," she heard Naruto say to the priest.

"Hyuuga Hinata, do you take this man as your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, in sickness and health, for richer or for poorer, til death do you part?" Naruto had obviously took his vows. She hadn't even noticed.

It was so simple to do it now. Say "I do" and all would be done. Why was it so difficult now?

"Hinata…" the man in front of her called. It was wrong. All of it. Her hands flew to her mouth as her whole form trembled. She heard Naruto move to her, but she lifted her head to stop him.

"I need you to tell me that you want me to say I do." She finally said.

"What?" her confused fiancé asked.

"Do you want me to say I do?"

"Of cou…" As soon as he started saying it, with all the love that was not meant for her, she knew what to do.

"We put a seal on Sakura. So that she couldn't get near you. She couldn't even think about you. It was a special bird cage seal."

His blue eyes widened. He was rooted to the spot, while gasps from the audience were heard all over the place.

"Hinata!" her father shouted, trying to reprimand her. She couldn't turn back now. It was then that she realized that she and Naruto never belonged to each other. She ignored her father for once.

"I also put you in a genjutsu to sever all your ties with her. That's why you could never feel her or think about her. It was the only way I could win you," she finally confessed.

She watched as he struggled to form words.

"It was not fair and I'm sorry."

Another blow of the wind caused her to crash on the wide bark of the tree. Sakura screamed as blood trickled from behind her head. She slumped on the grass. Her body had now refused to help her stand up. One of the two men approached her, but when he was a few inches from her, a barrier suddenly formed. Her mind scrambled to figure out what was happening but gave her nothing.

His face was completely covered with a dark cloth that not even his eyes could be seen, but he could see alright. He cocked his head to the side as he palmed the circular barrier. Sakura could only watch as she still struggled to stand up.

The other man was sketching something on the ground. Sakura could not understand why these two were here.

"What do you want?" she said, her voice already too weak to be heard. No one answered. The man in front of her formed a seal with his hands, mumbling something she could not understand.

"Kai!" he finally uttered as he forced his fist onto the barrier. It disappeared immediately. The man continued to approach her and held her arms, pulling her to where the other man was.

"Stop! Why are you doing this?" she asked once again. Nobody paid attention.

She was pushed onto the ground where the other man had been scribbling something. There, on the ground, she could only see circles, symbols she did not recognize. She tried to roll around and crawl away, her hands trying to grip the nearest rock from her. Blood from her head wound continued to ooze. Her vision was now completely blurred.

She could only go so far as a heavy weight forced her on her back once again. One of the two men was on top of her now, pinning her arms spread on her sides. Her breaths were ragged now.

"Don't!" she tried to yell. She was not able to move now.

Her consciousness was slipping. She felt another surge of pain as she heard a dagger cut her wrist. The two men were mumbling again.

Was this how she was going to go?

" *You're pathetic*," a feminine voice said. It seemed familiar.

" *You're pathetic*," it said once again. She had faintly remembered this voice from three years ago.

"Who are you?" she wanted to ask, but before she could voice it out, it spoke again.

" *Fight back*," it said softly this time. How in the hell could she fight back? She had lost all her ability to fight back years ago. She was sick now.

" *Fight back*," it repeated. It now angered her. Didn't this voice understand how weak she was? What was the point?

" *Fight back* ."

"I can't. Stop it!" she finally answered. She wanted the voice to go away. What did it know about her anyway?

" *Fight back!* " A strong emotion overcame her as she shouted in pain. She did not know what happened after that. Her blurred vision went white… and then she went.

A combination of powerful wind and chakra swept over everyone in the ceremony. Hyuuga Neji felt it the first time. The protective barrier he had put upon Sakura had been broken moments ago. If it weren't for his uncle's watchful gaze on him, he would've been out the door.

Every shinobi in that ceremony felt it. Uchiha Sasuke who had watched Hyuuga Hinata's confession unfold was not at all bothered. But the sudden energy over the entire place shook everyone's attention from the wedding to the invisible force just now, including him. It had the familiar air to it, like he had experienced it before. Was it that energy?

Most ninja had been spread out to find the cause of the disturbance by now. The heads of the villages were already in panic.

"An attack?" one woman shouted.

"Karin," he called.

"About half a kilometer from here," his subordinate answered.

"Sasuke, it's nothing like I've felt before. Something big's happening," the redhead added. Sasuke tried to remember when he'd felt this chakra before. Was it Madara's? Definitely not. He had killed him three years ago. But he was sure he'd encountered it.

Screw it, Neji thought. He needed to go to Sakura. She was in danger.

"Neji! Don't you dare leave this place!" Hyuuga Hiashi bellowed.

"Fuck you," was the only answer the older Hyuuga got.

Sasuke watched with black eyes the departure of Hyuuga Neji. Then a sudden thought came to him as he shouted to the groom.

"Naruto!" The blue-eyed man, who had been previously shocked by the sudden departure of his bride-to-be also felt the tremendous and familiar energy. Naruto saw the worried look on Sasuke's face as he also heard the defiance in Neji's voice while leaving the ceremony.

"We need to go. It's Sakura," Sasuke said.

"What?" Confusion overwhelmed Naruto. All that's happened was not making any sense. Was there an attack? He tried to search the crowd for Tsunade, whom he found with her eyes closed, sitting in her spot during the ceremony. She seemed trembling with fear and something else he could not name.

"Baa-chan," he called.

The Godaime opened her eyes with genuine fear in her eyes that Naruto has never seen before, not even during the war. It alarmed him.

"Go," she said.

"I'm giving Uchiha my permission to go. Shizune will follow you."

"But what's happening…"

"I said go!" the Hokage ordered. Sasuke was already waiting for him by the door. With much confusion, he took off with the sharingan-user.

"Spill it," Naruto ordered his best friend as they were leaping through the trees of Konoha at the fastest pace. He tried to make sense of it all. The possible attack should be the one bugging him the most, but his thoughts were all on Sakura. He could almost hear the chains in his heart breaking at Hinata's confession. Part of him wanted to believe that it was a lie, but it was time he believed in the truth for once.

The raven-haired shinobi did not answer.

"Teme! What the hell's happening?" Why were they going to Sakura? Was she alright? How would he face her? His chest constricted painfully. It was just now that he was truly terrified of seeing her again.

"You are the stupidest moron on Earth. I mean it this time."

"I know that already, you fucking asshole!" Uchiha Sasuke, who had been ahead of the blonde a few branches, did not need to look back at his best friend to see that he was near tears. His hands fisted at his sides. If only he could tell him the truth.

"Sakura's in danger. We need to get to her. Neji's already ahead of us."

"What?" Before he could ask more questions, Naruto noticed where they have arrived. They were in the academy. Scanning the area, he found two bloody forms near the swing. It was a horrible image, the sight of those two which seemed like they've been ripped to shreds. Sasuke was already approaching the bodies.

His vision settled on the kneeling Hyuuga Neji. He was holding a form in his arms.

"Sakura…" he heard Neji call. For the second time that day, he was frozen to the spot.

Neji blamed himself for leaving her. He knew something bad was going to happen, and yet he left Sakura to fend for herself to attend some stupid wedding.

The night before the wedding, he checked up on her. He accompanied her to the top of the Hokage mountain.

" *I feel it so close, " she said. She let the wind move slightly move her. Neji knew that aside from the academy, the mountain was the place she went to the most. She loved feeling the wind, for some strange reason.*

" *What is?" he asked.*

" *Death." He remained silent after that.*

" *You know what's funny? It doesn't scare me that much now. What scares me the most… is that one day, he'll forget about me. He'd search somewhere in his heart for a girl named Sakura, and he'll fail to find me."*

" *I know how selfish I am. That's why it surprises me how much I'm still willing to give everything up just to see him happy, even if it means I won't be." It was one of the rare times she spoke of him. Sometimes Neji wished she would not talk about Naruto in front of him, because it only caused him to want to punch him in the face.*

He was surprised to feel her fragile arms around his torso. A certain sadness went through him as he held her back.

" *You don't have to take care of me now," she breathed, burying her head on his chest.*

" *Yes, I do." His hold on her got impossible tighter, refusing to give her up to death.*

" *My three years is up. You heard Haji. Three to four months left."*

" *That's still plenty of time," he lied. She laughed, pinching his nose. In his life, he had never imagined letting any one do that type of stuff to him. But Sakura was a different case.*

" *Stubborn as ever, Hyuuga." She smiled at him. Truly smiled.*

" *I have something for you," she said, handing him a piece of scroll.*

" *I can never repay you for everything you've done. But I hope this comes close."*

He gritted his teeth as he looked around the academy's playground and found Sakura on the ground. She was surrounded by some kind of writings on the ground. There was no time to pay attention to it now.

Blood covered the side of her head, her clothes. Running to her in amazing speed, he knelt and checked her pulse, only to find her bloody wrist.

"Sakura, hold on, okay?" he called. She was not responding. His heart beat impossibly faster as he ripped a piece of his sleeve and wrapped it around her wrist to stop the bleeding.

He tried calling her name over and over, touching her cold cheek as he tried to figure out how to move her quick without agitating the blood flow. Soon he heard footsteps behind him, but paid it no mind.

"Sakura-chan," he heard from behind him. He did not know, but it made his blood boil in rage and anger.

"Don't! Don't you dare say her name," he said, his voice almost croaking in frustration. It seemed to work, for Naruto stopped in his stride to get near Neji holding Sakura. Neji had to think fast on

deciding where to take her. Uchiha and Naruto would never let him leave without them following.

Soon, Shizune arrived with a medical team.

"You can't touch her," Neji said to the head medic when she tried to take her from his arms.

"Neji, I need to take a look at her," Shizune pleaded.

"You can't help," he saw that he was testing the medic's patience.

"What the hell do you mean? Let me look at her!" the medic shouted.

"She's sick," was his last words as he jumped through the trees, Uchiha and Uzumaki following suit. To hell with all of this, he'd deal with the two bastards later. For now, he needed for Sakura to live.

To be continued.

Just so everyone knows, there's still a lot of ground to cover. Let's just consider this the end of an arc. I don't think we're halfway through the story yet. So I hope you still tune in. I'll be updating sooner if you like this chapter, I promise. :P

Again, your comments and reviews are all much appreciated. Thanks and see yah!:)

Enough

Disclaimer: No part of Naruto is mine. Though I'd give anything to have just his smile.

Yes, I am late. And yes, I am truly sorry. Things have been so hectic, and I do have a life. I just did not have the time to update sooner. But you should know, you melt my hearts with your reviews and comments. It has been truly an honor to write for my readers, and if it wasn't for your reviews, I wouldn't have been able to finish this chapter. That's how much they mean to me. So I hope you guys continue reading.

And ahem, a lot of things happen in this chapter. And you'd be happy to see some of my favorite characters. Enjoy!

Chapter 11: Enough For Now

I remembered you with my soul clenched

In that sadness of mine that you know.

Where were you then?

Who else was there?

Saying what?

Why will the whole of love come on me suddenly

When I am sad and feel you far away?

Always, always you recede through the evenings

Toward the twilight erasing statues

- Clenched Soul

He watched as her chest moved up and down rhythmically, his clenched fists never leaving the sides of his body. The sun had not even set, but it was already the longest day of his life. The respirator made beeping sounds as he gazed at Sakura's sleeping form on the hospital bed. Her left wrist was bandaged, and so was the right side of her head. Small bruises were visible all over her face and arms. She had not sustained very serious head injury according to Haji, but her condition significantly worsened because of the incident.

Despite the rules that they had set for Sakura, Neji had no choice but to take her to the hospital where Haji was already in duty. To his surprise, the two men who followed him did not say one word or interfered as he did so, but he could feel the Uchiha's intent focus on the girl he carried and could almost hear the wheels on Naruto's mind turning as he struggled to figure out what was going on. Doctor Yuy had been both surprised and pissed to find Sakura's bleeding form in his arms, but shook any ill feelings he had as he went to doctor-mode on the girl. It had not been a pleasant sight as the doctor and his nurses wheeled Sakura to the emergency room, but he was sure that it was going to be a worse one as he was left with Uzumaki and Uchiha at the waiting room.

If looks could kill and he was a lesser man, he would be dead already. He could feel, almost taste the furious inquiry from both men, especially Naruto, but he refused to give either of the men the pleasure of getting the answers from him. Hell, he didn't even care if it got down to a fight at that very waiting room. Again, to his surprise, nobody started talking or inquiring as to what the hell was happening. But he could see Naruto's fists turning almost white as he clenched them into a tight ball. Sasuke was significantly calmer, but that look on his eyes was certainly unpleasant. Men were truly not creature of words, Naruto at that point included.

Trying to ignore the two seething men in the room, Neji forced himself to fit the puzzles in his mind as he waited. He only had a moment to look at the bloody men who attacked Sakura on the

academy, but he was sure that he had not seen them before. Why the hell would they attack a defenseless girl? Perhaps it was robbery? Certainly not. And he was damn sure that it wasn't a random attack. They knew how to break the protective barrier he put on Sakura. That would take expertise on the Hyuuga techniques.

His mind was already supplying him the answers, but to an extent he wanted it to be wrong. The only plausible person who could have done it was his uncle, but why? Why would he go so far just to get rid of Sakura? She had never given them good reason to assume that she was going to interfere with Naruto and Hinata. Hell, she had agreed to every term they threw at her. There would be no sense to such harsh action. He was missing something, and he knew it. His uncle was not a harsh person without reasonable cause. But what cause would that be?

Before he could think further about it, Kakashi came into the room. Great, Sakura's former team was now reunited. That's exactly what he needed.

"S-sensei!" Naruto stuttered, while Sasuke managed a nod towards their former teacher.

"I need the both of you to come to the Hokage tower. Now," the white-haired shinobi stated calmly to his former students. His only visible eye seemed too serious though.

"We can't go. Sakura-chan, she-"

"Hokage's order, Naruto," his teacher retorted.

"What the hell is going on here? No one's telling me anything. Just please!" a frustrated Naruto yelled.

Kakashi knew better than to respond to such chagrin from the Uzumaki.

Neji, on his part, remained observing the conversation. A part of him pitied the angry Hokage-to-be but another wanted to keep him in the dark because it was better that way. The moment Hinata told Naruto the truth, she had freed him of her slight genjutsu. Judging by the amount of time that Naruto was under it, it would be a side-effect that he was hazy and unable to focus his thoughts. Sasuke seemed to recognize this and decided to interject.

"Calm down, dobe. What is this about?" Naruto visibly calmed as he took a seat on the cold floor, holding his head between his hands.

"I cannot disclose that to you," Kakashi answered.

"We need to know about Sakura's condition first," the Uchiha answered in a cold tone, perhaps trying to mask his worry. The white-haired jounin sighed before he responded.

"That's okay, Sasuke. Neji will be here. He'll make sure Sakura's alright, won't you Neji?" Kakashi turned to the mentioned Hyuuga with a seemingly forced crinkle on his visible eye. Neji, the perceptive one that he was, knew the tension in that statement, and despite his worry, decided to nod. Kakashi knew nothing too, that much he deduced. But he was damn good in pretending that he did.

"And besides, unless you two want to be dragged on your asses to the Hokage tower, then I suggest you better start moving. I may be old, but I am your sensei." Kakashi seldom threatened anyone, but when he did, it was to be taken seriously. With this, Naruto stood up groggily while Sasuke stood straight.

"Fine," Naruto grunted.

"Okay, then," Kakashi beamed in a suddenly cheerful tone. Before the three disappeared in a puff of smoke, he turned to Neji with a stare that the Hyuuga could not fathom.

Neji was left to wait on Sakura, but he knew from the start that with the arrival of Kakashi Hatake, ANBU uniforms were placed around

the hospital, especially near the emergency room. Godaime was definitely up to something, but he knew for sure that she would never harm Sakura.

He was here now at Sakura's private room. The motionless girl in the bed seemed tired, and he forced a sigh, slightly thankful that she was at least safe now.

"There's shinobi everywhere," Haji Yuy said as he adjusted Sakura's IV. He didn't seem any different, he still looked arrogant, but Neji knew that he too, was worried.

"They're here to protect Sakura."

"Are you sure?"

"Tsunade-sama sent them."

"You didn't answer my question."

"No, I'm not sure." He really wasn't. They could be sent there to prevent harm from Sakura, or to prevent her from getting out.

"Tsunade would get her answer if she asked," the doctor said.

They had talked about this before. The only thing that made Sakura's disappearance from the shinobi world possible was the fact that the Hokage did not interfere and let her be. She did not ask questions nor check on her former student. They had dismissed it as something that a Hokage must do especially since Sakura was no longer useful as a shinobi, but now, it made them think twice. Neji saw the look on her face as the blast of chakra swept through the wedding. There was a sense of fear and a tinge of expectancy to it. The Anbu was dispersed immediately too, and instead on focusing the force on the scene of the incident, they had been placed on the hospital around Sakura. It was like there was some sort of contingency plan going on.

"It's only a matter of time," Haji continued. The Hokage would get her answer. That's what he was afraid of. Because if Tsunade got her answer, then Naruto would too.

"Yes, it is." At this point, it would be futile to resist the Hokage herself. The only question here was how much did she know? It was time for Neji and Haji to tell all.

As if on cue, a cat-masked ANBU appeared in the room.

"The both of you are summoned by the Hokage." The two of them braced themselves for what was coming. Neji approached the bed of the motionless Sakura and squeezed her hands tenderly in a silent apology.

There was definitely yelling. Yes, yelling, and some furniture must be broken. Naruto, Sasuke and Kakashi were in the adjacent room from the Hokage's office where the Godaime was currently speaking with Hyuuga Neji and Doctor Haji Yuy.

Uchiha Sasuke sat on the couch with his eyes closed, probably meditating, while Kakashi who never grew out of his Icha Icha novels, had one stuck to his nose. Naruto, on his part, felt like he was going to be sick. In one day, he found out that the woman he was going to marry had him under a genjutsu all this time, that his former pink-haired teammate was attacked by some unknown shinobi and that she was in danger, and that people were refusing to give him some goddamn answers. Plus, his head was killing him, his limbs feel like they were jell-o and he has pain shooting through his veins. The noise coming from the Hokage's office did not serve to calm his nerves.

Breaking the silence, Kakashi coughed and decided to speak.

"Well! Aren't we glad she's not pissed at us?" he spoke, referring to the chaos that was the next room. He had let go of his perverted novel.

"How can you even say that at a time like this?" Naruto said in a pissed tone, while Sasuke merely opened his black orbs.

"Aww… come on, guys. This is the first time that we're together again. Cheer up." Naruto knew that Kakashi only ever made light of the situation when something bad was really happening. God, he felt so pained. As he grunted, Kakashi decided to drop the act and looked at Naruto intently.

"I- I can't think straight. I just, I can't - "

"That the effects of a long-term genjutsu. Tsunade-sama will hopefully give you something for it." Kakashi said.

"Why aren't people telling me anything?"

"Because you're an idiot who can't figure out things for himself."

"You bastard!"

"Stop it, both of you! Naruto! Disperse your clone. Sasuke! Unsheathe your sword. Now!"

"Even til now, you boys can't stop from killing each other, can you?"

A long silence filled the room.

"I just want some answers. What's happening… to her. To… Sakura-chan." Naruto slumped on the ground. The effects of the genjutsu was bearing down on him.

It pained the white-haired shinobi to see his students like this. He knew Naruto well enough to know that he was in a dark place right now. In all his years of being with the young shinobi, this was his most vulnerable state. And he knew Sasuke well enough to know when he wanted to say something but could not.

The door of the room opened to reveal a serious Shizune.

"Tsunade-sama is ready to see you now," the medic stated with her head bowed.

"Let's go, both of you," Kakashi ordered, thankful to get out of the room.

"Naruto-san, here," Shizune approached the young man and placed her middle and forefingers on his temples, supplying chakra to his head.

"That should make you feel better for the mean time. But you should see me for the rest of the week, so we can ease those headaches," the medic said apologetically before leading the three to the next room.

The Hokage's office looked like a war had taken place. Everything was not in place, save for the Hokage's seat in front of her table. The back of the seat was turned to them. The three shinobi opted to stand as the available seats had been probably thrown out the window.

The Godaime slowly turned her seat around to them with an unexplainable expression on her face. The three shinobi, no matter how powerful they were, visibly stiffened, bracing for whatever bad news was coming their way.

"How's your head?" the Godaime inquired.

"It's a little better," Naruto answered in a whisper. Whatever major side effects of the genjutsu had been drained from him left a nasty feeling in his gut. It left him feeling like a thousand kunai was stabbing through him, but he wasn't about to whine to the Hokage.

"Good."

Another dragging silence.

"Can we cut through the senseless bullshit here and talk?"

Kakashi sighed. Leave it to Sasuke to cut the tension with his arrogance. Here was returning missing nin who was gutsy enough to talk to the Hokage like she was anything less. Kakashi would reprimand his former student, but he knew it would be useless. Plus, he agreed with the raven-haired man. They were dealing with something big here.

"Fine, you foul-mouthed brat." The Godaime took a deep breath. There wasn't any visible jug of sake anywhere. She had to do this sober.

"According to Hyuuga Neji and Yuy Haji, Sakura is sick… and she's dying."

It took a long while before any of them gave any reaction. The female Hokage decided to continue.

"Three years ago, on her last mission, she performed a resealing technique on the Kyuubi. It should have automatically taken her life, but instead her body slowly and painfully deteriorated in return."

"Wait. What? W-What do… what do you mean reseal? On me? No, no, no, no…." All they could hear were Naruto's whispers.

"Get a grip Naruto. And stop babbling."

"This isn't true! Sakura, she wasn't there at the battle. She was with…" It was impossible. She couldn't have, could she?

"With Sasuke? You told me you didn't remember anything about what happened that day. It was only after the technique when she went to Sasuke's side. It explains the drastic change in the Kyuubi's behavior. Sakura refashioned the technique to benefit the jailer of the Kyuubi the most, in exchange for her life."

"You've gotta be fucking me? Stop fucking with me!" Naruto was pacing around the room now. Kakashi had to place a firm grip on his

shoulder to make him stop. He could only imagine the grief his student must be in right now.

"Calm down Naruto. This is not helping," he whispered furiously to his student. Naruto was struggling to get out of his grip like a madman. He was screaming profanities now, and Sasuke has helped by gripping the man's other arm.

"NARUTO! You have to stop this, okay? There's more." The Godaime and the two other shinobi, who were still locking Naruto in a death grip, waited until Naruto stopped his movements and his breathing returned to normal. They knew that the Kyuubi's power was dangerously afloat.

"S-So all of this… This is a lie? Sasuke?" He turned to his best friend. There was a lot that he wasn't disclosing, but the gaze that the Godaime threw at them told them that they shouldn't have that conversation now.

"Naruto, that was why Sakura quit as a shinobi. Her body couldn't take the stress. Haji Yuy became her private doctor then. The bird cage that the Hyuuga family placed on her a year after made her worse and is slowly poisoning her body. Neji has been helping in taking care of her, keeping her comfortable. But…"

"And… and you didn't know about it?" Naruto was answered with a furious look.

"The attack today against her on the academy. A team of jounin are already on the case but right now, there's no lead that could tie those who attacked her to anyone."

"I've placed ANBU ops with Sakura to protect her for the mean time. That is all we can do for now."

Naruto seemed so lost that he wasn't even listening. He was taking short breaths, while the two men behind her remained passive yet guarded. Naruto decided to speak again.

"How….how long?"

"She has three to four months. Shizune and I will be looking to her case, see if there's something we can do. But that's not until she wakes up." Naruto finished with a disbelieving sigh and could not form coherent words.

"I'm so sorry, Naruto," the Godaime stated, sincerity lacing her voice.

Not bothering to respond, Naruto disappeared in a flash. He only ever used his father's Yellow Flash technique in an intense battle. For him to use it in order to merely escape must indicate how unstable he was right now.

"Uchiha, I'm ordering you to keep an eye on Naruto. Make sure he doesn't do anything stupid," the Godaime ordered.

"Like that's possible."

"No backtalk!" That shut the Uchiha up.

"Sasuke, why don't you follow Naruto, ne? Let him cool down and maybe we'll talk this out later." Kakashi said to the Uchiha in his usual happy tone, like they had not just received bad news.

"Now, please," the white-haired jounin said in a sing-song voice. The raven-haired Uchiha, deciding that it was useless to retaliate disappeared with a puff of smoke.

As soon as the Uchiha disappeared, Hatake Kakashi's previously crinkled happy eye turned into a serious stare as he turned back to his Hokage.

He stared at the Hokage for a minute or so before deciding to speak in a low voice.

"I backed off because it was a direct order."

"…"

"From you."

"…"

"You said it was necessary."

"…"

"She is my student."

"…"

"This will end badly, Hokage-sama."

"If you're finish, you can leave now, Hatake."

The release of smoke was the only sound that could be heard. The Godaime sighed for the thousandth time that day. Things had gone out of hand.

When she was a child and something bad happened, Tsunade Senju's grandfather, the first Hokage made her close her eyes and think of good things so that she'll get better. Apparently, that technique only applies to children. Because now, even when she closed her eyes, the Godaime could only think of the chaos that they were all in.

"Hokage-same, he's ready," came the sweet voice of her assistant.

"Okay, then."

Leaving her office, the Godaime Hokage disappeared in gust of air only to appear near a small pond in front of a traditional Japanese house. It was near midnight but the whole house was with light. She walked until she reached the house, where a sliding door was opened for her by kneeling servants. A man was sitting calmly behind a table with served tea on it.

"Aah, Tsunade-hime, take a seat."

Tsunade accepted the offer with gritting teeth.

"How have you been?"

"Let's cut the crap, Hyuuga." The man's previously cheerful façade had turned to a menacing appearance.

"My, my, someone is unpleasant today."

"You were out of line today."

"No! I was merely doing what is required of me."

"If immunity wasn't bestowed upon you…"

"Then what? You'd convict me of following the law?"

"It was attempted murder."

"It was the Child of Calamity!"

"…"

"I am not the one bending the rules here, Tsunade. This is our responsibility. There has been numerous occasions that this child had let loose the power, and what did you do? You dismissed it. You and your motherly instinct."

"You could have consulted me."

"You wouldn't have listened. This is not for selfish interests, Hokage-sama. Don't even play innocent with me. You knew. You knew, that's why you backed off, and ordered everyone else to back off. You're just as anxious as me in waiting for that child to die."

"Leave the child alone."

"I was just making sure to eliminate the child. Faster."

"Leave… the child… alone… This is my decision."

"Yours, you say? You are deciding for the entire Konoha's fate. You better decide right or I will finish this for you, Tsunade."

"Watch it, Hiashi." Tsunade's fist had destroyed the lithe wall beside her now. Hiashi Hyuuga, seeming unfazed just motioned to stand up and leave the room.

"I think you have overstayed your welcome here, Tsunade."

"You should see what that child did to my puppets today. That child is capable of so much power. You better be careful." And with that, he left.

This was not the type of conversation she was hoping for.

"Forgive us, Sakura."

That was what they said, Neji and Haji, as they explained to her that the truth had come out and it came from them. She wanted to at least be angry, but she knew she could never be mad at those two. They were kind enough to go along with her crazy plan this whole time, and it was not their fault that they had to spill it.

They left her to rest after that, Neji mentioning something about seeing someone. She felt so groggy but refused to go back to sleep, she was too numb from the meds anyway. She wondered who would attack her like that, and who would bother, but no answer came to mind. If it hadn't happen, then things would still be, well, normal - sick-normal, noone-knows-normal.

She thought about Naruto, and how horrible it must have been for him to know the truth. He should be in his honeymoon by now, and she wished desperately for him not to care about the truth. But she knew in one way or the other, this would affect him and pissed him off. Tsunade-sama too. She had disappointed her master on so

many levels, and now she'd probably think she was incredibly stupid to keep something this fatal.

"You're incredibly stupid," came from a deep voice, one that she'd recognize anywhere.

"So… I'm guessing you know, sensei."

"I do." Her former sensei Hatake Kakashi took a seat beside her bed and placed his legs on the edge of the bed, his arms folded in his chest.

"I don't' know what to say."

"How about 'I'm incredibly stupid' "

"Hey! I think we've already established that," she said in a strained whisper.

"Plus, I didn't think it was stupid. I still don't think it is now," she continued.

"I think Sasuke was on to something then when he said that emotions only lead to the downfall of shinobi. Cause it did lead to mine. And yet, I don't regret it. Naruto deserves a long life."

"And you don't?"

"Well, compared to him, yes. Of course. Absolutely," she almost yelled.

"He's the child of prophecy. The one who was going to change the world. And he did. All my life I've been looking for a reason why I'm a shinobi. I finally realized the answer when I knew I had to give him my life."

"You let him hate you."

"I loved him enough to let him hate me."

Kakashi stayed silent for a while, before deciding to answer her.

"Well that's incredibly stupid."

"Would you stop saying that?" she finished with a giggle. Her sensei might not say it, but she knew he understood. She moved her hand in order to tap his leg currently on the edge of the bed.

"I missed you, sensei." She meant it. She missed everyone in the shinobi world, and wondered what they would think of her now that they would hear the truth.

Kakashi moved to sit on the edge on the bed and smoothed her pink hair.

"Missed you too, kid," he said, with a smile seen on his eye. She rewarded him with a smile he had not seen for so long.

"Will you do something for me, sensei?"

"Anything for my student," he teased.

There were a lot of things she needed to fix.

"I need to speak to Naruto."

She would start with that.

To be continued…

I want to know what you think about this chapter. It's a bit short, but I really wanted to end with this. Because next chapter will be when Naruto and Sakura finally meet. Yey! Keep the reviews coming, cause if you liked this chapter, I would update the next one by Monday next week.

Thank you so much for the support.

Ja ne! :)

Hero

Disclaimer: Naruto's not mine. Blah blah blah.

It's been a while, huh? I can almost feel the readers' murderous rage towards me right now. I actually am scared of you guys right now.

I'm really really sorry. Really. I didn't want to make you wait all this time just to piss you off. Just hear me out, okay? I know I promised to update this story, errr, a month ago. But it's just that it just really took a while to finish this. You see, the scene in this chapter between Naru and Saku is the basis for this story. I mean, I built the whole story around it. And it is a big deal for me to make this really good. It took some time. This is the hardest chapter I've had to write yet. So I hope you understand. Please please forgive me?

If you don't, I understand. But for those who do, thank you for sticking with this story. It means a lot. This is my Christmas gift to you guys. You're also free to give me a gift by reviewing. Thanks! Hope you like this. :)

Chapter 12: Hero

One may think we're alright

But we need pills to sleep at night

We need lies to make it through the day

We're not okay

-Pills

The familiar cold of night caressed his face and enveloped his body with the grace of an unseen lover. The almost metallic feel of the

blades of grass tickled his toes as he walked briskly towards the main house which looked as gloomy and uninviting as the first time he had ever laid eyes on it as a boy. His fisted hands clenched more firmly as he approached his destination. He unceremoniously yanked the beautifully-crafted sliding doors of the traditional house, ignoring the gasp of the several servants behind it. He didn't even bother to take off his sandals.

"Where is he?" he asked in a cold voice, with a bare hint of suppressed anger.

"H-He's having his usual tea, N-Neji-sama" the poor servant answered meekly. The way she managed her retort reminded him of his lovestruck cousin. She's been rubbing off on these servants, he thought.

"Where's Hinata?" he supplied.

"A-ano…" the servant started. She bowed even lower as if deeply pondering on her answer. Judging by the servant's hesitation to answer her master, his uncle must have put her in hiding for humiliating him and the entire clan. She would probably be never allowed to be seen by the public for a long time, at least until the "incident" that happened subsided.

Irritated by the lack of response, he decided to end the servant's agony and proceeded to the quarters where his uncle was. Shinobi classes in the academy had taught him to pick his own battles, learn to back down, even retreat if the odds were against him, especially if there would be a better opportunity to confront the enemy later. He learned to never engage in battle without thinking any plans through. It had helped him accomplish even the most dangerous of missions without compromising any of his team members. This was one of the few times that he would betray this belief. It was his uncle's damn fault that he had never felt so much rage.

He found his uncle Hyuuga Hiashi in the middle of this large room sitting in front of a delicately crafted table. His guards stood three

paces or so behind him. He wore a straight face, his lips forming a thin line as he poured himself some Oolong tea. He didn't even look up as Neji entered the room in one swift stride. He knew that his uncle knew why he was there.

There was not a doubt in his mind that his lunatic of an uncle was the one behind the attack on Sakura. Nothing that was found on the corpses indicated any connection to the Hyuuga or their techniques, but he knew damn well that it was Hiashi's. He also knew that Tsunade was aware of this, but did not know for the life of him why the Hokage had refused to inquire on his uncle. It angered him more that she has ordered an end to the investigation of the attack.

Few people and even fewer shinobi today has seen the head of the clan's techniques in an actual fight, but Neji has heard of his uncle's animation technique. He had never really seen it, but back when he was a boy he remembered that his father had these strange-looking puppets that he trained with. His uncle probably had them after his father's death. He could feel all his restraints coming loose as he drew a deep breath.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" he hissed.

"Having my usual tea, of course" his uncle replied, obviously catching on his nephew's worse than foul mood, but still not bothering to look at him.

"You tried to kill her!" Neji bellowed, taking a step closer to his uncle. The guards of the clan head moved to restrain the seething Hyuuga but Hiahi signaled to let him be.

Neji tried counting to a hundred in his head summoning whatever was left of his patience waiting for his uncle's reply. Hiashi put down his cup after taking a quick sip and wiped his mouth with a clean cloth.

"You have no idea what you have gotten yourself into," he finally said, his gaze settling on Neji. There wasn't any indication of emotion

in those eyes.

"You made her life a living hell already. You had what you wanted. Why try to kill her now? Just for the shit of it? Just like what you did to my father - "

"ENOUGH!" Hyuuga Hiashi's voice echoed throughout the main house like a lion's roar. His temples tightened with the appearance of large veins as his face shook with malevolence that only the head of the clan can muster.

Along with his menacing voice came the uncontrollable pain shooting from the center of Neji's skull and rampaging throughout his body. He immediately fell on the floor, his lower body unable to support him anymore. This was the first time he felt the effects of the Caged Seal for the branch members of the family. He imagined the strain to his body that would come with it, but he did not expect the unimaginable pain that would follow. It felt like his whole body was being shred into pieces, his bones being crushed to ash, while his brain threatened to explode. His arms and legs moved as if being twisted by an invisible force. He forced to restrain the scream that formed in his throat, refusing to give his uncle the satisfaction of victory. He bit his lower lip with his teeth so hard that blood came oozing down his chin.

Hiashi approached his writhing nephew and knelt in front of him, grasping his bloody chin and forcing the branch member to look at him.

"You think you have this figured out, huh, Neji? What did you even think of accomplishing by coming here? It's only because of me that you managed to look after that girl this long. Don't even fool yourself for one second that you that anything you do is not controlled by the Hyuuga clan. By me. If I ordered you to kill that girl you would have no choice but do it. Remember that," he said in a low but dangerous voice. "And stop trying to be a hero for that girl. It is very unlike you," he added.

Neji could only manage a croak in response. He was practically swimming in pain barely registered the threat that his uncle imposed on him. He was still trembling by the time Hyuuga Hiashi had canceled the technique and started to leave the rooms, his guards following suit. Before Neji passed out, he faintly remembered his uncle's voice.

"It was really rude for you to interrupt my tea time."

He arrived at his apartment still exhausted from his encounter with his uncle, now enraged more than ever. He stumbled through the door, placing his palm on the table for support. His body was too weary it demanded rest but Neji refused to succumb to the need to lie down. He scrambled towards his closet and with trembling hands reached out to a scroll. He slumped on the floor of his bedroom and unrolled the said item. He coughed a small amount of blood to his side before taking a deep breath. He read the patterns and signs that were written in it over and over again, trying to memorize it with his hands.

" *This is still in the first stages. It would be far too dangerous to test it at this time. But in the future someone may be able to help you improve it."*

That was what she said. Sakura would never forgive him for what he was about to do, but he knew he had to do it. It was amazing how at her state she was able to create such a scroll. Neji was not about to let it go to waste. It wasn't just about him anymore, it was about her safety. While the seal still holds with him, he would not be able to protect her.

The caged seal, according to the scroll was like a lock on a Hyuuga, both physically and mentally. It hypothesized how it would open with a key. This key lay in the body of the one with the seal. It could only be unlocked through a precise flow of chakra with complex chakra spots. This chakra route traveled from his hara, around his vital organs and finally towards his brain, as if in a puzzle. One wrong

route would result to one's death. Sakura must have figured it out given how sensitive her chakra points were when the seal was on her. But it was a different case, that's why she warned him not to try it.

For once in his emotion-ridden life, he realized how sick he was of being controlled. The death of his father warned him of how defiance was dealt in his clan, and that led him to a life of subduction and forced servitude to the main branch. He thought now that his father never obeyed because he was forced to do it, he obeyed to protect his son, who would be left without a place in the clan should he fail to plead loyalty. It was time to make a choice. And that's exactly what he was doing.

With precision and practiced speed, he formed a series of what seemed like hundreds of seals, not stopping until he felt his chakra building around his hara. Without a second thought, he had let go of his chakra. What ensued was a pain worse than what he had experienced with his uncle. He had to hold the route or else it would end. He must have been delirious but as he slumped once more on the floor, he saw or dreamed his father in front of him, looking at him with the same eyes as he remembered. He wore his traditional outfit, but his feet were bare. He looked at peace, but his eyes looked sad. *Do not be sad, Father,* he thought. *I am doing this for you. For us.*

Hyuuga Hizashi stood still. As Neji released a scream towards his father, he felt as if his body parts were releasing from their hold on him. If this was the end, he would not go down without a fight. He made to clamp one last time on his chakra control, and let the image of his father move towards him as if to envelope his being.

The hospital was just the way he remembered. He used to hang around here all the time, pestering Sakura for dates and annoying Tsunade-baachan and Shizune as he tries to help filing the medical records alphabetically. Sakura would most of the time be in the surgical wing, or sometimes she'd be taking patient rounds. Naruto would always find a sleep-deprived Sakura in this big building and

he'd never fail to irritate the living crap out of her. But then again, he'd also kept her awake by doing so. It felt like it happened a long time ago, like it was now only a fleeting memory. He couldn't believe it.

There were a lot of things he couldn't believe. A week ago, he had everything he wanted coming into place. A week ago, he only had nightly nightmares of the girl he thought betrayed him. A week ago, he was alright with the nightmares even though his heart clenched painfully when he thought about it. A week ago, he was hell bent on forcing himself to fall in love with the pale eyed woman. He couldn't believe that everything was fine a week ago, because truthfully, as it turns out, it wasn't.

The corridors were as quiet as they should be. Patients were already asleep as nurses file records at the station. He often played ghost pranks on nurses during graveyard shifts which always earned him a sucker punch from Sakura. He always did it because the night makes the Konoha hospital a somber place. His eyes wander to the white walls as he takes careful steps towards the stairs. He didn't realize it, but his hands were sweaty despite the cold air that surrounded the hospital.

He couldn't name what he felt when Kakashi-sensei approached him with Sakura's request to meet with him. There were so many things he wanted to ask her, tell her. When he had decided to hate Sakura for leaving him and betraying him for Sakura, never in that time did he stop and consider the possibility that he maybe wrong. He knew that that kiss they had before the war meant something, but it was overwhelmed by the stabbing pain in his heart that told him that she had just used him to get to Sasuke. He had been so blind, all because he was willing to be blind. Sakura had actually saved him that day, but for reasons he couldn't fathom. Why should she do it?

" *You just have to find out things for yourself, Naruto. Go talk to her," Kakashi had said.*

He was nearing his destination and he thought he was going to have a heart attack. What would he say to her? Did Sakura hate him now? After all she's been through because of him, she should be. Not even a thank you was appropriate for this kind of encounter with her. Should he say sorry then? He should. And more. But he didn't know where to start. The first time he saw her in three years was four days ago when she was attacked. The sight of her pale body all bloodied was all it took to give him an intense blow to the chest. It all boiled down to one thing - he was the one who caused her to give up everything, her career, her friends, her life. And what did he give her in return? Three years of suffering.

He had never hated himself the way he did right now, and that included the first time he realized he couldn't bring Sasuke back, and the time when he hurt Sakura in Kyuubi form.

He stepped into the dim-lighted corridor of the pediatric section. A few steps away stood the pale form of a young woman. She was facing at a wide transparent glass, thoughtfully gazing at the new lives in the world. Naruto knew she was aware of his presence, but didn't acknowledge it right away. He held his breath as he approached Sakura. Her pale face was illuminated by the light from the infants' room. Her hair was so long now that it reached her lower back. Her forehead, no longer adorned by her forehead protector, was now grazed with pink bangs. She wore a long hospital gown and a thick brown sweater which did not hide how thin she was. She hid her hands in the pockets of her sweater. Her paleness struck him. Sakura had been a fair-skinned woman, but now she looked too white and anemic.

He stopped a few steps from her where she still faced the infants laying on their cribs. He faintly noticed that there were probably ten infants in the room, but he remained facing her side. Kakashi didn't exactly tell him which room Sakura would be, but something told him that he should check out the pediatrics section first. Back when Sakura was still in medic-training and became frustrated and upset, she'd go here and look at the cute babies.

He uneasily released a breath, pondering on whether he should say something first. She took a hand from her pocket, laid it on the glass, and opened her mouth to speak.

"That baby, third one from the left, he cries every twenty minutes. I think he has blue eyes," she commented. He noticed that her voice was weak, almost only a notch higher than a whisper. Whether it was to not disturb the babies or because of something else, he wasn't sure. "That one to his right, he's so quiet. He doesn't even stir from his sleep when the other babies cry," she pointed. "And that one on the center, she always wakes up but doesn't cry. She moves her arms and little fingers a lot. The nurse has to tend to her regularly to cover her with her blanket," she noted with a smile. When was the last time he saw her smile?

A pregnant pause surrounded them as Sakura just continued to look at the glass in front of her. He summoned a deep breath and let out a croaked voice.

"S-Sak-kura…" he started. Naruto seldom stuttered. Not in front of the enemy. Not in the face of death. But now, in front of Sakura, when he knew how much damaged he had caused, he didn't have what it takes to put up a brave face.

Sakura slowly turned her head from the glass. For the first time in the longest time, she looked at him with her emerald eyes. Her lips formed a small smile, the kind she used to give him, as if nothing in her life had gone horribly wrong. "You're taller," she said, her gaze settling on the top of his head and falling back on his eyes. They stayed like that for a while, and then returned to looking at the babies. "You found me here. I can't believe you remembered," she added with what Naruto heard was a faint giggle.

She talked as if nothing was wrong. She smiled at him as if nothing was wrong. His heart beat so fast as he tried to once again find his voice.

"Is it true?" he asked. He needed to hear from her, needed to know what made her keep that kind of thing from him, even if it meant that he would consider it her betrayal.

"You weren't supposed to know," she answered without looking at him. Her eyes had slightly narrowed in a low gaze as she pulled back her frail-looking hand back to the pocket of her sweater. His breath hitched at her answer.

"Wha… Why w-"

"Because." She interrupted before he could string his question. "You can actually pick your reason from a variety of answers," she said. "One, it could be because of a shinobi's duty. When one comrade is fallen in the team, especially if that comrade is necessary for the success of a mission, the less important comrade sacrifices herself if necessary for the fallen comrade. For the success of the mission, or to win a war. Actually, what I did was fairly similar to what every Konoha shinobi does in every mission when he or she has to protect a team mate. In my case, I was just weak, so the repercussions were a bit..more complicated."

Naruto tried to form a response but Sakura continued speaking.

"Two, it could be because I wanted to give you my payback. You have saved my life more times than I can count. You put your life in danger for me every single time. It was about time I tried to save you, even for just one time. Though I hardly think that's enough payback, " she spoke in a firm tone now.

"Sakura…"

"Three, it could be because I was doing it, for the safety of the whole shinobi world. You were the child in the prophecy Jiraiya was talking about. I saved you for a greater cause. Because you were going to bring peace. And you are going to end the war. Imagine how it would suck if I let you burn and die there while I watched. The whole shinobi world would be on my ass for not even remotely trying to

save you. That would suck big time," she added now with a hint of amusement.

"Stop joking around…" he warned.

"You see, those reasons are sufficient enough for why I did technique to bind the Kyuubi to you," she said with the loudest voice she had since they started the conversation. Her face visibly softened as she said her next words turning to him and looking at his eyes. "You can just pick a reason from those three. Because if I told you, the real, simple reason why I did it… Then it wouldn't be fair. To both of us," she said almost inaudibly.

She looked at him softly, her hand moving in her pocket, as if to reach out to him, but she stopped. "You were burning in front of me. And you were screaming so loud. Your skin was already peeling from your flesh. How could I not save you?"

Naruto's heart clenched horrible in his chest, almost coaxing him to break down and cry, to hold her tight and apologize over and over. But he didn't. He knew what she meant. Her reason was the same as his every time he put his life on the line to save her.

"You could have told me," he said, trembling.

"No. That was never part of the plan. If I had told you, you'd be distracted again. And you'd want to save me. You would be sidetracked from going after your dream to be the Hokage. And you would look so helpless and confused, just like the way you're looking at me now," she pointed out.

"You could have told me," he repeated, partly because her reason wasn't good enough, and partly because he couldn't say anything else.

"You already thought that I had gone to Sasuke. After I bound the Kyuubi to you, I tried to look for help and then I found him. He needed help too. I didn't know where I got the strength but I healed

his eyes and made him promise something in return. I saved him… because he is our brother. By the time I was about to return to you, you were already so mad and wouldn't listen to me. You had already convinced yourself that I didn't stay with you, so I thought since I couldn't tell you the truth, why not let you think that?"

His face twisted in agony upon hearing her words. Years and years of rejection and failure had led Naruto believe that he wasn't good enough for anything. Sakura had loved Sasuke for so long that he automatically chose betrayal over love.

"Don't' look like at me like that," he heard her say.

"Like what?" he asked.

"Like you pity me," she answered. No, he thought. That wasn't true. What he pitied was himself. "I deserved it, you know."

He looked at her in disbelief.

"That story of me going to Sasuke and leaving you, that was completely plausible, believable even. I have always made you feel like I'm using you, like you were a poor replacement for Sasuke. It's really not your fault that you believed it. Everyone else would have believed it," she urged.

"I'm not telling you now so I'd make you feel guilty. I'm telling you now… because I want you to let this go," she said in a pleading voice.

"And just what kind of person do you think I am?" he said, incredulous to her proposal.

"You're Naruto. You're inhumanly kind. And you have this innate urge to save everyone else. But this time, you just have to let this go. Believe it or not, this, what happened to me for the past three years was the best way to go for me. It made me realize how weak I am to be a shinobi. Leaving the ranks and living as a civilian made me at

ease, because then I won't have the opportunity to screw things up and endanger any more lives."

She took a step towards him so that he's only an arm's length away. "I've lived a good life. Lots and lots of mistakes, but saving you was the one right thing that I did. It's a good life. Now, you, on the other hand, have a long way to go. You're gonna be the Hokage, and you're gonna have a whole village who loves you…. And you're a gonna have a family with a wonderful woman. You're gonna have a long and happy life because you deserve it more than anyone." With one hand, she reached for the hem of his jacket, just touching the fabric. Naruto could almost feel her cold hand. "This thing with me is way too little and insignificant for you to worry about. I'm just a little sick. And it'll be over in a few months… I'm only sorry that I didn't leave our shinobi team earlier. Look at you, rising through the ranks in just three years… I *have* been holding you back, haven't I?"

"That's not true," he said, moving his hand so he could hold her hand that was now clutching his jacket, but she moved it away before he could.

"Yes, it is. See? Such a kind young man. Stop consoling me. You hate me remember?" she reminded.

"Sakura, I..I," he started, stuttering again.

"Hinata-san, she's good for you. Real strong woman. If I have played any part for the delay of your wedding, I do apologize," she said sincerely.

"They put a seal on you," he defended.

"Only to keep me from hurting you again. Hinata-san loves you, that I'm sure of. And she just wanted to protect you from me. I unconsciously hurt you all the time back then, and I think she recognized that. I wouldn't hold it against her if I were you. You could have a great life together," she said. By now, all Naruto was hearing was the loud beating of his heart and the fast pace of his pulse. No,

he didn't have a happy life without her for the past three years. No, he fooled himself that he could be happy with someone else. No, now he couldn't forgive anyone who hurt Sakura, including the Hyuugas, including himself, especially himself.

"They hurt you," he said painfully. *I hurt you.*

"I hurt myself, Naruto," she whispered, saying his name for the first time. The way she said it brought all those feelings he buried and chained away in his heart for so long. Just like that, in a snap second, he felt all his hate towards her wash away, leaving a feeling of longing. It was as if all this time he had just convinced himself that he held ill feelings towards her. His love for her had been masked as viral resentment. The need to reach out to her was becoming unbearable. "I hurt *you* too. I broke every single promise I gave you that day. And I am deeply sorry for that," she added, placing her hand in front of her chest to tell him that she meant it. "I only want you to be happy. Please be."

Naruto took two steps towards her, intending to hold her face in his hands, to tell her that she doesn't need to feel that way because it was all his fault. Damn his pride. But before he could, a voice behind Sakura echoed from where they stood.

"Sakura, you need to get back to your room," the voice said as its speaker approached Sakura. He had long hair tied in a low pony and wore a white robe. He remembered that guy. He was Sakura's doctor, according to Shizune when they walked out of the Hokage's office.

Sakura turned her head to acknowledge the man. "Okay. Just a minute. Please Haji?" she said. The man curtly nodded and took a step back to be out of earshot. Sakura returned her gaze to Naruto.

"I have to go. Take care of yourself, okay?" she said, turning her back to him.

"Wait…" Naruto started.

"You know," she interrupted again. "I used to think that if our life was a story for a novel, then you'd be the hero who saves the day and I'd be the heroine, the one who's by your side all the time and the one you come home to." Her shoulders slightly slumped as she continued. "But I'm wrong. I'm just the annoying minor character who thinks so full of herself and all the readers just hate and bash her. She has to die in the end so the story could end happily for the hero."

"Stop it, Sakura. Just stop it!" he said, infuriated. Sakura was thinking all wrong and it made him want to punch wall to make her stop. He wanted her to face him again. But she made no move to do so.

"I'm sorry. I'm making you mad again… Don't worry," she said, turning only her face to look at him. "This is the last time."

With that, she walked away towards her doctor. The man let her walk past him as she vanished from Naruto's view. Naruto remained frozen to the spot, wanting to follow the young woman but his body didn't obey.

Before Sakura's doctor walked away and followed his patient. He turned to Naruto and said, "You know what annoys the hell out of me? Sakura used to be so strong. And now, thanks to all of you, you've managed to make her convince herself just how weak she is and how she deserves to die. You should be ashamed of yourself."

He didn't need to tell Naruto that. He already did.

The walk back to her hospital room was quiet and agonizing. Haji walked silently behind her as they passed the other rooms.

"I had to do it," she said as she walked ahead of him.

"I know," the brown-eyed doctor said.

"Did it go well?"

"It could've gone way worse… I could've cried."

"You've had three years of poker face practice," Haji pointed out.

"Yeah." Silence again.

"Did it hurt?" he finally said.

"Like hell," she answered. Haji thought that after three years of not seeing the young man would've helped Sakura let go of her feelings for the blond. Apparently, he was wrong. The pain he knew Sakura still felt was like that of a fresh wound. Not even time could heal it.

When they were just two doors away from her room, they noticed a man sitting in front of the bench across Sakura's door.

"Goodie. Dad's here," Haji commented in a serious voice. Sakura just sighed as she walked towards Neji. "I just need to get your file from the nurse's station. I'll be right back," he said as he walked in the opposite direction, fully confident that someone was looking after Sakura.

Sakura took a seat next to the pale-eyed Hyuuga clad in civilian clothes. She didn't want to lie in her bed yet.

"Haji said you were probably talking to him," he said as he stared at her door.

"I'm still mad at you, remember?" she responded.

It had been no more than a day since Hyuuga Neji was rushed into Dr. Haji Yuy's care as his body was in full shock. It turned out that he attempted to break the caged seal from his body using no more than Sakura's highly experimental-stage scroll manual and his will. Even though it miraculously worked and Neji was still functional after his attempt, Sakura and Neji still received the scolding of a lifetime from

the handsome doctor. He yelled at Sakura for giving Neji that scroll and he yelled at Neji for being stupid enough to try it.

"You shouldn't be," Neji said. His forehead was covered in bandage. It would be weird to see him without the markings of the seal on his forehead.

"I told you to not try it soon," she said in an angry voice. Though she clearly posed no threat when it comes to hitting him, Neji still felt some amount of fear on his part.

"I talked to the Hokage earlier," he stated. "Obviously, Hiashi wants to execute me for breaking the seal and he wants me to surrender your scroll."

Sakura visible stiffened at this, momentarily forgetting her anger for the Hyuuga beside her.

"What did Tsunade say?" she asked, looking at Neji.

"There's no part of the law which states what will happen to a branch member who breaks away from the seal. After all, it wasn't even possible until now. So the Hokage is trying to settle this without killing me in the process. I'll be staying with you for the meantime." Clearly, he wasn't welcome in the Hyuuga quarters anymore.

"With me? Have you seen my apartment? You're better off in a hotel," she said.

"Someone needs to protect you."

" *Someone* needs to back off. I'm fine on my own."

"We both know that my uncle was the one behind the attack. Hell, even the Hokage knows it. The fact that she doesn't do anything about it makes it not true."

"It's because of me that you're breaking away from your family," she said.

"You're my family now. Family protects each other," he replied. He honestly did not regret breaking the seal. He had never felt more freedom than what he felt now. He was interrupted from his thoughts by a faint chuckle from the young woman beside him.

"I didn't know you could get sentimental, Dad," she teased.

"Haji's rubbing off on me," he teased back.

"HEY!" Haji shouted as he approached the two, intending on defending himself. Sakura just laughed louder. At that moment, he felt what it was like to have a real family. This was his family. He was going to protect it with his life.

Midnight came with a torrent of thin rain falling. Nothing could be heard but the steady tap tap of water falling onto everything it reaches. Sasuke Uchiha stood in the center of a pile of scrolls in the basement of the Uchiha manor where he had been looking at confidential files for the past two days. He was reading one particular scroll as Suigetsu came down the dusty stairs.

"We found him," the shark-looking man said.

"Where?" the dark-eyes man inquired.

"He was previously at the Konoha Hospital. But then he left. And now, well…" Suigetsu said as he faltered in continuing the sentence.

"Suigetsu…" Sasuke warned, his patience already wavering.

"Okay, okay! He's out in the woods destroying things. You know, uprooting trees, rasengan-ing boulders. You know, the works," Suigetsu said amusedly.

"I see."

"Must be really upset," Suigetsu said off-handedly.

Sasuke Uchiha took his coat and replaced the Kusanagi sword in its holster. He walked up the stairs and towards the oak door of the mansion.

"Stay here," he ordered his team.

He needed to do this alone. It was time to talk to Naruto.

To be continued…

SO! Whaddaya think? You like it? Please review. Thanks! Happy holidays!

Halfway

Insert standard witty disclaimer here.

Whoa! I am on a roll! Bet you didn't think I'd update this soon, ne? Bwahahahaha! Anyway, I have been loving all your reviews and it's still Christmas vacation, so I figured I'd update as much as I can. You're welcome!

Once again, thank you so much for your reviews. Some of you have really put some thought on theirs, and it just warms my heart that you're taking the time to write them. Please rest assured that I am taking your suggestions and really trying to improve the story. Just keep them coming, 'kay?

So, I hope you enjoy this chapter. It's not that long, but it is a turning point. So… without futher ado…

Chapter 13: Halfway

But I love your feet

only because they walked

upon the Earth and upon

the wind and upon the waters,

until they found me.

- Pablo Neruda

It hurt so bad to feel so human. He remembered a time when all the destruction he caused was due to the monster inside him, a time when he lost control of his bearings and would just let go, let the

Kyuubi take over. It was so goddamn ironic that he yearned for that now, because at that moment, it was all him. The Kyuubi was no longer the threat, for the monster's power only lent him the power he needed for any battle. It no longer took over, no longer gave him the excuse to destroy everything in his path. No, Kyuubi was no longer the threat, Naruto was.

He did not know how long he stood under the steady rage of the rain. Only the light created by his rasengan made things visible from the dark mist of the night. His screams were muffled by the occasional thunder as he attacked everything non-living around him. The splinters caught in his clothes and the underside of his nails did not bother him. As long as he kept moving, shoving things aside, throwing them far away, he did not care. What must have been hours of releasing his rage only seemed like mere minutes because of his chakra reserve. He had never let himself go like this, did not even advocate it even, but he was willing to try anything to feel something other than guilt that was clawing at his chest. His soaked clothes clung to his form as he left the rustling of leaves in his wake, looking for other things to wreck and uproot.

He was not supposed to be this pathetic, but he doubted if there was any other choice. Finding out how the past years of his life had been a big fat manipulated lie hurt more than anything he had managed to live through in his life. What's even worse was that he was not the one paying for his mistakes. It was Sakura. Her doctor was right. He had reduced her to a heap of failure waiting for death. She was willing to die for him, and in his way, all he was willing to do was let her.

He was like a drunk madman in the forest, swaying aimlessly where his muddy feet took him. He slumped beside a river loud in its flowing current. His bruised trembling hands formed a seal to create an equally somber clone. Having nothing else to aim rasengan to, he might as well drive it through the river and watch as it creates a mini-tsunami. A swirl of powerful wind manifested itself in his right hand.

"That can't be safe," a voice called out behind him. It was almost inaudible due to the raging noise of the storm, but Naruto could recognize the voice anywhere.

"Leave," Naruto said, not bothering to turn and face his visitor.

"This is illegal. Do you know old those trees are?" the voice commented, not showing any hint of fear with Naruto's obvious murderous aura. The swirling wind Naruto held had dissipated by now.

"I said leave!" Naruto bellowed. He had already managed to massacre half the training grounds south of Konoha. He did not need pep talk right now. What he needed was to exhaust himself to death so that that there won't be time to wake up.

He slumped still, unmoving even when he heard footsteps towards him.

"Stop, Naruto," he said, placing a hand on his right shoulder.

He stood up abruptly, turning around to face the expressionless Kazekage for the first time. He too was wet from the rain, but not as much as him.

"NO!" he said, stepping away from him and punching the bigger remains of the nearest boulder he had hit earlier. "This is some screwed up life!" he yelled in frustration.

"Shit happens," the red-haired man replied, his face seeming almost gentle in the rain.

"Yes! Shit happens. But I'm supposed to be the hero. I'm supposed to know when something's up. I fix the shit that happens," he screamed, remembering what Sakura told him. "I at least should have been there for her. I should have known!"

Gaara only looked at him. Conversations like these made him realize how vulnerable Naruto really was despite his loud and hero-complex exterior. Even in the darkest of times, he watched as Naruto rose up to every challenge. Even when sometimes he was the cause of the problem, he always manages to fix them. That was because he was Naruto. He had never seen him so broken up like this. Naruto never let himself be this brooding pessimistic person. He always believed in better days.

"We make mistakes Naruto. We can only hope to be forgiven," he said, finding a lack of better words to say. He was aware of the extent Naruto gone through to protect his bond with his precious people, especially with Sakura. He also knew how it must have hurt for Naruto to personally break them because of betrayal. He only wished there'd be time to mend them.

Naruto's form had gone weary, once again hunching down a fallen log.

"She's dying," he whispered, choking on a sob. "I'm the cause of that. I couldn't… I couldn't even apologize… I… I…" he lingered, covering his face with both his bloody hands.

"Stop consoling that loser," another voice came as its owner strode forward the muddy land.

Gaara watched as Sasuke Uchiha, more stoic than ever, walked past him and towards the blond. Strapped at the back of his waist was the Kusanagi sword. He too was drenched in the rain.

"Uchiha," Gaara acknowledged. The raven-haired man just gazed at him and nodded.

"It surprises me how you can have the patience to console this dobe. He doesn't deserve it," he said to the Kazekage while nodding towards Naruto.

"What do you want?" the blond murmured. His eyes were now covered with his dripping bangs.

"Stand up," Sasuke ordered. Naruto remained still. "It's awfully unfair to take out your repressed rage on things who can't fight back. It's pathetic, even for you." The Kazekage had to scoff at the last living Uchiha. Trust Sasuke to make thing worse by antagonizing the already seething jinchuuriki.

"Leave," the blond started. "Leave before -"

"You hurt me? Please. I can let you try. Go ahead," Sasuke challenged.

Naruto's whole body started trembling, whether to get ready to attack the Uchiha or to stop himself from doing so, the Kazekage didn't know.

"I don't think this is a good idea, Uchiha," the redhead warned.

"He needs to snap out from this stupid stupor. Obviously, consoling doesn't work. So you can either help me beat him up or just back off," Sasuke retorted, turning towards Naruto once more.

It was quite amusing to Gaara how the Uchiha dealt with the blond. Theirs was a screwed up friendship, but it was one that mends every single time it was close to breaking. Whatever the raven-haired had under his sleeves had better work. As he disappeared in a cloud of his water-resistant sand, he just hoped one doesn't kill the other.

Neither Sasuke nor Naruto turned around to see that Gaara had left them. Naruto still had his back turned from the raven-haired man. "Get up. Fight me," Naruto heard him say. He refused to face the man behind him.

"Look at you, you one heap of pathetic. You know, even at her state, Sakura's better off without you." Something in him snapped, red

chakra pouring outside his body as his hands took hold of Sasuke's neck.

"Not..bad…" he said as if his feet weren't off the ground with the force of Naruto's hold. Reaching behind him, he unsheathed his sword, slashing it towards the blond.

Naruto released his hold, taking one swift step back. "You knew! You knew what happened and you let her take the blame!" he yelled, throwing one punch after the other with unbelievable speed. His actions were a blur, but Sasuke had already activated his sharingan, dodging the blond's attacks.

"I promised her I wouldn't tell," he said as Naruto punched through a nearby tree. Sasuke slashed his way through another to make room for his opponent.

"For fuck's sake! Since when did you learn to keep promises?" he accused, a swirling amount o f chakra in hand.

Nearly an hour passed by as the two former teammates fought. Sasuke was as calm as his usual self despite the imminent threat posed by Naruto. He was aware of the power Naruto had, but this wasn't about winning or killing him anymore. Naruto was not in his right mind to even concentrate on hitting him. He was just releasing massive amounts of chakra, not caring if he hit Sasuke or not. It was easier to take advantage of the blond's carelessness, for he was nearing exhaustion.

He soon held the tip of Kusanagi towards a panting Naruto who had his back to the only standing tree around them. Naruto didn't even care.

"I can't do anything now," the blond let lout with a shivering voice. Sasuke had never been this frustrated with his former teammate.

Throwing away his sword, he held Naruto's collar with both hands as he pushed the blond forcefully towards the tree. "Get your head out

of your ass!" he let out, yelling for the first time.

"You don't know anything! I hated her! More than I hated anyone because she chose you! Because she used me!" Naruto yelled back, taking hold of the fabric on Sasuke's shoulders, his fingers raking through the raven-haired's skin. Sasuke did not wince, but instead tightened his hold on the blond in his own wrath.

"She was protecting you. She healed my eyes so I wouldn't grow blind, and then made me promise to come back to Konoha, for you! She sealed my tongue so I couldn't tell you. All of that just for you!"

" *You need to come back to Konoha, because you're his brother. And he will need you.* "

"She let you hate him. She let you loathe her with every fiber of your body just so you'd stay away from her," he continued. His voice did not betray any emotion but Naruto felt his hands shaking. "She would let death take her just so you wouldn't hurt anymore." Silence took over as Sasuke continued shaking.

"Believe me, if you let her die just like that without doing anything, you will carry it for the rest of your miserable life. You will never be able to forgive yourself and not even killing yourself would suffice," he finished, releasing his hold of the blond and staggering backwards.

Naruto could only let hot tears and pouring rain run through his face. He wasn't just talking about Sakura. Sasuke had gone through the same thing. With Itachi. Sasuke was too blinded with hate and the idea of revenge that he didn't realize how Itachi was the one trying to save him. In the end, even as Itachi willingly died in his hands, Sasuke never knew the truth. What good did the truth serve if Itachi was already dead? No amount of redemption would ever mend that.

Would Naruto go through the same pain too? Of course he would. It would be painfully worse.

It must have been dawn when the rain stopped while the two of them remained at a standstill. Sasuke stared blankly while Naruto shook with the cold wind, their faces covered in blackening bruises and dried blood.

"Don't you think I want to fix it?" he finally whispered.

"Then do it," Sasuke answered, picking up his sword and sheathing it. Naruto snapped out of his reverie with the raven-haired man's movement.

"I don't know how," he said as he settled down and took an exhausted breath.

"That's what I came here for," Sasuke said.

"Didn't you just come here to beat me up?" The Uchiha just had to smirk. At least Naruto had stopped being the brooding idiot he was earlier.

"I have a plan."

He watched as Sakura tried, no struggled to lift the brown paper bag and hug it to her chest while she walked. "I told you to let me take that. Haji's will kill the both of us if he sees you like this," Neji commented, effortlessly holding the other paper bag. They had just gone to the local grocery and were now walking towards home. He practically begged for Sakura to just stay at home and wait for him to do groceries, but he failed again to no avail.

"Please. Since when did you get scared of Mom?" she said. The bag only contained a couple of fruits and a carton of milk, but someone with her Sakura's condition shouldn't even doing so much or lifting so much.

"Do I have to yank it out of your arms, Sakura?" he said, finally annoyed. Sakura stopped ahead of him and turned around, her pink

long hair swaying in the wind.

"Do I have to remind you that it's my apartment you're living now? Against my will? My apartment, my rules. And I say that I do the groceries." She turned around again satisfied with herself and started walking. Neji had been thankful that she was in good condition today, but her episodes come without prior notice. It had been becoming more frequent for the past months and it scared him. The best way was to confine her to the hospital, but Sakura just refused. They had to settle with a weekly visit with Haji to the hospital or him coming to her apartment if she's too weak to walk.

This was the one thing about Sakura that he hated - she was the best with lying, especially when it was about her health. She hides her pain under a permanent smile and cheerful voice, which was convincing sometimes, but it worries Neji more than it relieves him. She doesn't scream in pain in front of Haji or him even when her episodes come. It was frustrating to deal with everyday, now that he was staying with her. The Hokage and the Hyuugas were backing off for the moment, but he had to be ready for any surprise "visits".

"Where are we going?" he asked as Sakura took a turn around the corner. Her apartment was the opposite way.

"I just want to stop by Takumi-san's music store," she answered without turning around. It was a considerably hot day, but Sakura wore this not so thin sweater. She must have been cold today, he thought. She never tells him if she's uncomfortable, the independent idiot.

Among the list of Sakura's to-do-before-kicking-the-bucket-soon was rekindling her passion for music, especially playing the piano. She used to play it as a child, her father being a pianist himself. But after her parent's death and Ninja Academy, she stopped playing altogether. Takumi, the fifty-three year old owner of the music store, let Sakura play the classic piano everytime she visited and bought music sheets and compositions. Her deceased father had been a

frequent customer, and after Sakura got sick, she visited the store often.

It was the first time Neji accompanied her to the store, because she always insisted on going there alone.

Neji opened the door for her as they arrived and took the paper bag she was carrying. The bell sounded as the white-haired man welcomed them to the store.

"Sakura-chan! You're back!" the old man exclaimed as he took hold of Sakura's hand. He visibly stiffened as he felt Sakura's hand. It has always been cold and seemed fragile.

"Takumi-san! I'm sorry I haven't been able to stop by," she said and offered a smile.

"Have you been sick again, dear?" he said with a sad look.

"Just a little under the weather. But I'm feeling good today," she answered and proceeded deeper into the store. Neji could see that the man had a worried look in his face. Anyone could see how pale and weak Sakura had become.

"How is she?" the man asked Neji. He was fairly sure that the man did not know what was happening with his pink-haired companion, but the man knew a sick person when he saw one.

"She's getting by," he plainly said, and left it at that.

"Oh, good. It's good that she has someone with her today," the old man said and smiled as they followed Sakura to the black classic piano.

"That's what I'm here for," he said when he was out of earshot.

"It looks as beautiful as the last time, Takumi-san," Sakura said as her fingers grazed the ebony and ivories of the piano. Her face always lighted up when she was near a piano.

"It's more beautiful when someone as good as you plays it, Sakura-chan," Takumi said in a breathy voice.

"Stop teasing, ji-san," she said in a slight blush while stroking a basic melody. "Have you found the music sheet yet?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not, dear. I've tried asking my contact in other villages, but none has turned out yet," the man replied.

"What are you trying to find?" Neji interjected. Sakura stopped stroking the keys and looked up at him.

"Oh. My dad used to play this amazing composition when I was five. After he died, I guess we lost the music sheet. I haven't found it yet. But Takumi-san has been helping me," she said, nodding at the old man.

Sakura took a place in front of the black piano and started playing a slow melody. Her small fingers glided across the keyboard with such grace and precision. It was a somber melody. The string of notes were quiet and slow, only growing in intensity at certain parts, but altogether it was not something one should play to cheer someone up. It put Neji in a trance, almost gaining him access to Sakura's emotions. When she played, all her pretenses vanished and all that's left was her melancholy. There was no smile, only sadness. A deep dark depression.

"Sinking into deep water," the man beside him muttered as he closed his eyes to appreciate Sakura's playing.

"What?" Neji asked.

"It's a composition entitled 'Sinking Into Deep Water' by Ryo Sakai. It's a heartbreaking melody. It fits Sakura-chan well even the first

time she played it here," Takumi answered.

Sakura continued playing while the two of them silently listened. She looked so peaceful while she played, as if nothing mattered but her music.

But something wasn't right.

He silently walked away as Sakura neared her song's bridge. He had to end this quick. Opening the store's door, careful not to make too much noise with the bell, he quickly turned towards the unwanted guests.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, struggling to be polite.

"We're not here for you," the raven-haired man answered. Beside him was Naruto, his eyes looking weary with dark bags under it. Despite that, he looked decent compared to the time when he last saw him. Behind them was Shizune, the Godaime's assistant.

"In that case, then you can leave. We need to go home," Neji said, turning around to go back to the store.

"Neji, please." Naruto's voice cut through his stride. "We, Baa-chan and us, we just need to talk to Sakura."

"Your last conversation with her should have been enough for you to know that she doesn't want that," he explained. It was hell for Sakura to face the man she was willing to sacrifice her life for. He didn't know if Sakura could handle another one.

"But -"

"Naruto. It is only out of respect for you that I say this," he breathed. Naruto was after all the one who made him realize what it meant to be an actual human being. "Please leave now, and take that traitor out of here," he said, looking disgustingly at the Uchiha. The raven-haired man let out a sarcastic laugh.

"I guess we just have to kill him to get to her," Sasuke said.

"Take your shot, pretty boy," Neji said, taking his stance. Why not? He had been itching for a chance to beat up that smug bastard. He watched as the Uchihas's eyes changed to its bloody red Sharingan form.

"Hey hey! Stop!" Naruto interfered as he got in the way of the two who were getting ready to blow shit up. "We didn't come here to fight Neji. Seriously. Just please. We need to talk to Sakura."

"I told you. What Sakura needs is peace, especially from both of you," he said.

"Just get out of the way, Naruto," Sasuke added, his sword already in hand.

"Good God you're both making this so difficult!" Naruto let out in frustration as another sound of the bell echoud.

"What's going on here?" a soft voice interjected. Sakura stood wide-eyed behind Neji, directly looking at Naruto. Neji sighed.

"We need to talk to you," Sasuke answered. Before Sakura could form any response, Neji decided to speak.

"Sakura, just go inside the store until this is finished," he ordered.

"Until what? You beat each other up? Stop acting like ten year-olds!" she exclaimed.

"Just get back inside," he repeated. He might be able to take the Uchiha down. He was not so sure about Naruto. But he was as sure as hell going to try.

"Let's get this over with," the raven-haired commented.

"Shut up, traitor," he called back. Sasuke's eyes turned to slits as he took a quick step towards Neji, whose Byakugan was now activated.

"Stop!" Naruto's calls were in vain as Neji too got closer to the Uchiha, delivering a blow to his side while the Kusanagi managed to slit Neji's cheek.

"Sakura!" Naruto's voice called again. Before either Sasuke or Neji could deliver the next blow, they heard the sound of liquid spilling. Neji could see Sasuke momentarily become wide-eyed as he turned around a coughing Sakura.

At that short moment, her blood had already spilled so much on the ground. She clutched her stomach while the other covered her mouth. The hand covering it did not do any good as more blood came spilling. She wasn't even coughing it now. It was just pouring out of her mouth and nose. For a moment, Neji stood frozen, scared of the sight he was seeing. He had seen Sakura like this before, but this one this time was worse. As he snapped back to reality, Naruto was already catching Sakura as she lost her bearing, blood covering half her face and the clothes in her upper body.

"Don't touch her!" was the only thing he could yell as he tried to get to her, but Sasuke had already gripped both his arms to keep him from moving.

Neji understood, or wanted to understand that Naruto too was a victim. It was Sakura's choice to keep the truth from him, to let him hate her, to let him move on without her. But through the three years he has been with the young woman, there was something inside him, a part which he didn't know how big, that resented Naruto for causing Sakura so much damage. He often asked himself why that part of him was mad at the young man when Sakura herself could only wish happiness for Naruto. But at that moment, that part of him wanted to break out and rip Naruto away from Sakura.

He struggled still, as Sakura was quickly losing consciousness while Naruto wrapped his arms around the young woman. Shizune and another medic came to their side with something to wipe some of the blood.

"We have to take her to Godaime-sama. Go fetch her doctor," she said to the medic while she took Sakura from Naruto's arms. "Meet us at the Godaime's." With a quick puff, she disappeared with Sakura.

Sasuke released his hold of Neji whose blood now was boiling. Naruto stood up, his clothes mostly bloodied. Who were they to care now? As much as Neji wanted to punch their living daylights out, he had to check on Sakura.

"You're not hers to protect," the Uchiha managed to comment as they were getting ready to leave. It was Neji's turn to laugh sarcastically now.

"And whose is she to protect? Yours?" he asked the Uchiha. "Yours?" he said in an angered voice, turning to Naruto. "You don't know half the shit she's been through because AND for you! And you just left her! Now you're telling me to back off just because you're here now? You've gotta be kidding me," he finished, disappearing as he leapt through the roofs.

People were pissing him off so bad today.

She woke up in a daze, hoping that what just happened was just a dream. Sasuke and Naruto did not come for her. Neji did not just challenge Sasuke to a fight. And she did not just throw up a wad of blood on Naruto's clothes and pass out.

It was easier to think that it was all a dream. But somehow the pair of blue eyes that was looking at her now told her that it was all real. Naruto's orbs were the first things she saw as she opened her eyes, looking worried and something else she couldn't name.

A hand came touching her forehead as she tried to sit up.

"Sakura-san, you collapsed on us earlier. How are you feeling?" Shizune's calm voice said.

"I'm fine," she lied with a smile. Her stomach felt hot and queasy, something it did every time whenever she threw up blood. Her limbs felt more sore than they usually were, but what was more uncomfortable was the look Naruto was giving her since she woke up. He had obviously changed from his clothes from earlier. He wore a white shirt with his orange and black pants. Her heart beat faster. She didn't know whether it was because a part of her dreaded seeing him or because a part of her was glad she got to see him one more time despite the circumstances.

"Where am I?" she asked, trying to distract her thoughts.

"At the Godaime's. She wants to talk to you," Shizune answered. She lay in a large couch in one of the rooms in Tsunade-sama's mansion.

"Where's Neji?" she asked, remembering how angry his voice was when he spoke to Sasuke.

"He's with Baa-chan. She's talking to your doctor, too." This time, it was Naruto who answered. The last time she talked to him, he was stuttering and could not form any response. But the way he spoke now reminded her of the Naruto she knew.

"Oh," she lamely said. It was her turn now to be speechless. She had not plan on running into Naruto soon, so she ran out of things to say. Things like that for her required practice now.

"Can you walk, Sakura?" Shizune said.

"Yeah," she answered, grateful to be out of the room from Naruto. But as she left, Naruto only quietly followed.

They were led to the surprisingly neat Godaime's office where Haji and Neji were already waiting. Sasuke stood at the corner of the room, next to Kakashi-sensei.

"What's going on?" she asked while Haji approached her and checked her vitals. It was like a reunion of her precious people inside that room. Haji asked her routine questions as she still felt Naruto's gaze at her back. Even after the attack, her former master never personally visited her. She just sent orders from afar. It was her first time to see her after three years. She looked just as young, but something in her eyes changed.

"Sakura," Tsunade-sama started.

"We may have a way to save you."

After thinking all this time that the end will come soon, something told her that it was a long way before she gets there.

To be continued…

Man! Writing this chapter took a lot out of me. Are you excited? I'm excited too! Take note that for the last few chapters, I've been deliberately telling the chapters from Neji and Haji's point of views. Well, I just love them. Maybe that's why you haven't felt much emotion from Sakura. Hers is bit tricky. She's bottling up so much for so long that it's gonna take a lot to write from her point of view. But don't worry, for the next ones, I think her and Naruto's POV'll be used. So please stick around to know what happens. Thanks!

Please don't forget to leave your reviews. The more reviews, the more motivated I get to update. :)

Colorblind

Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto. Yeah, tell me about it.

I'm back! Writing the next chapters for this story has been a massive pain. It gets harder, I tell ya. Sorry if it's a bit late. It just took some time. And you should know, that I'm also working on my thesis at the moment, so it's just been a busy month. Hope you understand.

Thank you all for the reviews. I appreciate them all, both the good and the bad. So, here's the next chapter. Enjoy!

Chapter 14: Colorblind

I like you calm, as if you were absent,

And you hear me far-off, and my voice does not touch you.

- Neruda

The silence in the room was threatening. No one moved a muscle as they waited for the Fifth Hokage's next words. The Hokage's great table separated her from the rest of the people in the room. Sakura was the only one sitting in the chair with the cushion, the rest standing almost uncomfortably around. The girl was not looking so good. Tsunade feared that the cushion would swallow her and would never let her emerge again.

"I'm sorry?" Sakura said with a hint of sarcasm in her tone.

The Fifth Hokage took a deep breath, that of an old person's - weary and tired.

"There is a legend of how the sealing of beasts in humans came to be. The way it is known now, the one who seals the beast in a

human must sacrifice himself in order for the process to be a success. That's the way it has always been, even for Naruto," Tsunade said as she paused and saw the man she was talking about visibly cringe at the end of the room.

"The process of sealing is much like that of life transfer, and by the way that your doctor described your technique on Naruto, it's a little bit of both. While transferring life energy to Naruto, you, in effect, refashioned the seal of the Fourth Hokage on him. As of now, we don't know why your condition is like that. Now, there is a fairly unknown legend that tells of a person who survived the sealing of a beast. Kyoshi Namine. She was said to be the very first shinobi medic and the first one to perform the sealing of a tailed-beast and survive it. There has been no record of her dying and we believe that she is in Owari now," she finished. Tsunade watched as Sakura wearily glanced around the room, probably realizing that she was the only one who hasn't heard the story yet.

"So?" she simply asked.

"I'm sending a team to find the original medic, bring her here and take a look at you. Uchiha volunteered, as well as Kakashi and Hyuuga Neji. For the mean time, I'm assigning Naruto to be your body guard at all times until the team comes back with Namine. We do not know when your attackers will strike again, so we will make sure you're protected. You will also have a weekly meeting with me and your doctor for check ups and medications. And also, I want you to move out of that filthy apartment of yours and back into your parent's house," the Fifth Hokage declared. Another silence prevailed in the room, the rest of the people obviously waiting for the sick girl's reaction to the news.

Tsunade expected anything from Sakura, except her full-blown laughter. In her seat which seemed too big for her, she clutched her stomach as a rumble of laughing noises came out of her throat. Everyone seemed too stunned to inquire about why the hell she was laughing. The thin girl seemed too fragile to even generate a laugh

like that. Her reaction lasted for about a minute as Tsunade rearranged herself in her chair, waiting for Sakura to speak.

"Oh my God… I mean, I'm sorry. It's just really funny," the pink-haired woman finally stated, remnants of her laughter still being heard by the people in the room.

"What is?" Tsunade asked glumly.

"Okay, you do know that *that* is a legend, right? Another word for a story that's not true? Where did you get it, a children's book?" Sakura answered, her tone increasingly becoming hostile.

"It came from an account from Uchiha Madara's journals. He personally met the woman, and believed her to be an immortal one," Uchiha Sasuke interjected. Sakura turned around from her seat.

"So this, this ridiculous plan, is your idea?" Sakura asked the sharingan-user.

"This is our only shot, Sakura," Hyuuga Neji added. Tsunade watched with a watchful glance how Sakura turned her attention to the pale-eyed man.

"I can't believe you agreed to this," she said in a whisper to Neji.

"I approved it. Plus, seeing as Neji is not in good terms with his clan right now, it's best that he leaves the village while we sort things out," Tsunade interrupted. Sakura was still standing with her back turned to Tsunade when she replied.

"Can everyone just give me a minute alone with Godaime-sama, please?" she said in a neutral tone. The rest of them visibly pondered on whether to grant the girl's request. She obviously did not approve of what they were planning.

It had been too long, the Fifth Hokage thought. Wanting Sakura to be protected and wanting her to know the truth were not mutually

exclusive at the moment. But a part of her wanted to bring her both.

"Go," Tsunade simply ordered the shinobi and doctor in the room.

It had been five minutes since the people left in the room, and Sakura still had her back on her former shishou. Tsunade waited patiently for her to finally say something as she closed the open window in her office to keep the cold wind from entering the room. It would be a cold night tonight.

"No," Sakura finally started, facing Tsunade with a stern look on her face.

"This isn't your decision anymore," Tsunade calmly retorted as she slumped in her chair.

"The hell it isn't! You're making them go on this wild goose chase while ordering your successor to protect a sick civilian! Have you lost your mind? This is obviously not a matter of national security, is it?" Sakura had started her rant. It reminded Tsunade of the spirit she once admired from her student. She had always been one to speak her mind, even though she knew she wasn't going to win against her master, or Kakashi and occasionally Naruto for that matter. Sakura was classified as a first generation shinobi from her file, and she did not demonstrate any remarkable trait worthy of a bloodline shinobi. But people remembered her for her wit and ability to think fast. She always made a valid judgment, and Tsunade thought that this moment was not different from all the other times they argued about what treatment to use for a certain disease or injury.

"They are the ones who volunteered for this, Sakura. And I'm allowing it," Tsunade answered. Again, her former student was testing her patience, a trait that she had never been known to possess much of.

"My point, *again,* is why? Why are you allowing this? You know they're never gonna find her," was the pink-haired's answer, her strained voice threatening to be louder than it already was.

"You know, this lack of optimism facade that you seem to put up is getting old, Sakura. I thought you were mature enough to comprehend that martyrdom is not the way we shinobi do it these days," she fired back, tired of Sakura's willingness to die too easily. She could see Sakura's eyes widening, slowly being filled with surprise and hurt. Granted, it was more mocking than it was helpful in their argument, but Tsunade had heard enough.

"You think this is about being a martyr? You think I choose to suffer so I'd be later known as a brave hero who saved a life?" she said in a croaking voice, tears threatening to fall. "Those… are my precious people out there," she said, pointing outside the door. "Most of them I've hurt because I was always weak. And to put them through this, just so I can believe in some false hope that you're giving me is beyond acceptable. I will never forgive myself if even in death I am still a burden to them," she groaned out, her hands trembling and fisting at both her sides.

The tears that Tsunade had expected to fall from her student's eyes were not visible. She did not notice that her hands had been trembling too on top of her table. The one trait that she noticed right away upon getting to know Sakura was that she loved too much. She was like that with her patients, she was like that with Sasuke, and she was more with Naruto. There wasn't much she wouldn't do for them, and it had become both her strength and weakness. Seeing her like that put a dull ache in her chest. Tsunade tried to calm down and think of a better way of phrasing her words.

"I understand where you're coming from, Sakura. I do. But you know these precious people, and there is no way in hell that they are just going to stand back and let you die like that," she started.

"I kept silent for a reason, Tsunade," Sakura replied. "I like it that way."

"You are not protecting them by keeping away. We are not letting this go and just let you go through this by yourself," she stated with finality.

"You did. For the past three years. And I never questioned you for it," Sakura said in a firm voice devoid of judgment or accusation. She was simply just stating a fact. Tsunade's eyes widened for a split second before she got a hold of her emotions at Sakura's statement.

"We are going to do this with or without your permission as a direct order from your Hokage. You may not be a shinobi anymore but you sure as hell are a citizen of this village which I am the leader of," Tsunade said while slowly rising from her chair. "You may not believe in me anymore, Sakura, but I want to protect you," she added, this time with a gentler voice.

Sakura refused to look at her the rest of the conversation, even when the rest of the people returned to the room and until Haji escorted her back so she can rest.

The room had been silent again after she briefed Hatake Kakashi and the others for the mission. Uchiha Sasuke would join the team without Juugo and the others with a strict warning that Tsunade will personally cave in his pretty little head should he stray from the group. As for Naruto, he was not to leave Sakura's side, despite Neji's objections that another shinobi should be assigned to guard Sakura.

"Do you not have confidence that Naruto will be able to protect her, Neji?" she had asked.

"Believe me, Godaime-sama, I have no qualms about his strength and ability and I have the highest respect for him, but his history with Sakura…" he started in argument but Tsunade beat him to a retort.

"Exactly, Neji. I did not choose Naruto to stay with her because he is the strongest, but because his history with Sakura may provide us with a proper diagnosis and treatment for her. Her life energy resides in Naruto now, and we may have to put him through tests to find a connection. It's actually just an additional perk that he can protect her," she stated calmly. It was true. Naruto had volunteered to take

any tests that could help Sakura in any way, even agreeing if there was a possibility of reversing the life transfer. "Would you like to argue more..or are we done here, Hyuuga?" she added. The said man remained silent, and Tsunade knew that it was the closest to an agreement that she would get out of him.

"Good. Now, I've ordered ANBU to transfer her things back to her parent's house. Help her get settled first and be ready for your departure at dawn two days from now. That is all. You're dismissed," Tsunade ordered.

Naruto, who had been silent all this time, lingered for a moment after everyone had left, hesitation apparent in his face.

"Do you… I mean, do you think…" he started, his blue eyes boring intently at the Hokage.

"We'll do everything we can, Naruto. Just keep her safe for now. And it would be nice if you can try to patch things up with her," she answered, already knowing what was bothering her supposed successor.

"I don't think that's even possible at this point. We don't remember how to be around with each other anymore," he said trembling, one hand covering half of his face as if to keep something from falling.

"Hey," she interrupted. Naruto had never been this vulnerable for a long amount of time. This was taking a toll on him already. "You want to save her, right?" He nodded in answer. "Then we'll start with that." His glance returned to her, a little calmer than before. After another nod, he left the room.

Once they were finally gone with only Shizune in the room, Tsunade slumped heavily in her chair, slamming her head on the sturdy table which supported a mountain of neglected paper work. Her assistant approached the table with a ceramic bottle.

"You've been sober since the wedding, Tsunade-sama, so I'll make an exception tonight," Shizune said, while pouring white liquid into a glass, something she never did since she became Tsunade's apprentice.

"Not tonight," her master said, steadily walking towards the windows and opening it, letting the cold air stir around the room.

"May I speak freely, Tsunade-sama?" the raven-haired woman asked.

"You know you always can, Shizune," she regarded while gazing at the village she vowed to protect even before she knew how to hold a kunai.

"I think that you're allowed to change your mind about what is right, even if you are the Hokage."

"I thought I was doing the right thing three years ago."

"And this is the right thing now."

Long pause.

"I am the Hokage, and yet I treaded this thing so carelessly."

"We are all human first, Tsunade-sama. And I think you are doing the best you can, given the code that was passed to you regarding… regarding the child."

"Was I wrong then, Shizune? When I chose to ignore it and let her…?" she said, unable to continue.

"I seriously don't know. But… I think what we are doing now is better than before. And I think things will be better soon," her apprentice told her in an attempt to soothe and reassure.

"I hope you're right," Tsunade said, closing her eyes and letting the bitter chilly wind caress her face into numbness.

To say that they had tension was a bit of understatement.

It had been three days since Kakashi's team left to find Namine. Getting to Owari required a month of travel and going through warzones and Sakura voiced her disapproval albeit very thoroughly, but by that time, Kakashi, Sasuke and Neji had learned to tune her out. The only thing she told both Neji and the raven-haired shinobi before they left was "Don't you dare kill each other."

Sakura had safely moved back to her parent's house. Shizune helped her settle in while Naruto hung out awkwardly in the living room. It was the same as Naruto remembered the house. He had visited here a few times, even crashed in the couch for some nights. Save for the books and he assumed a few things that were brought back, he thought that nothing much changed.

Naruto was to stay in the house, occupying the couch as his bed, and accompany the girl for weekly checkups and other errands. Few words were shared in the first week.

"You can't go to my room," she had said in a firm tone. They were in the living room, both standing about a fair distance from each other. "There's another bathroom at the end of the hall. You can use that. And Shizune-san restocked the pantry so you can cook and eat whatever you want. They're mostly whole grain and lean meat, but I guess you can bring ramen if you want. She said she'll be coming by to bring food but just in case, you can have anything in the kitchen. There's also a housekeeper who would come once a week. I..I also go out depending on my… mood. But you can go out whenever you want." There was a long pause. With a quick okay, Naruto agreed. There was only so much he could say when she was obviously trying to be casual with their living arrangements.

Sakura spent her days locked in her room which he cannot enter. Sometimes she came to the living room to pick out a book in the shelves and then proceed to the patio where she'd read for the rest of the day with a big blanket over her form. It was a different kind of

boredom for Naruto. Most days he would wonder what's happening with Sakura in her room, sometimes standing outside the door attempting to knock and see if she was okay. But he was always unable to. So he would pace around the house, looking at old pictures and even browsing through books himself, though most were medical ones. Sakura loved readings classic novels and poetry, so maybe she kept them in her room, which he was always reminded he was prohibited to enter. At night, he hears coughing sounds from her room, but they fade by midnight or so. By morning, she'd emerge, make some breakfast and tea as if nothing was wrong.

One time, he found her sleeping in her chair as the night was coming. He attempted to wake her with a soft shake in the shoulders and then she woke up and hurried back to her room. That was the closest he had been to touching her. Even through the thick blanket that covered her form, there was a certain coldness that reached his hand. Her body looked like an assembly of misassembled parts, very thin and fragile. Even her face looked very different from what he remembered. Anyone would judge her to be really sick.

Wednesday came and Sakura came out of her room, looking a bit better, dressed to go out with a long-sleeved beige shirt on, dark brown pants and sandal which covered her feet. He was reading some scrolls on the kitchen table.

"I'm going out," she said to him.

"Uhm, where?" he said, hastily standing up and putting the scrolls in a bag. He wore a relatively thin t-shirt and pants with his forehead protector on. It was a hot day, and he thought Sakura was wearing stuffy clothes. Then again, ever since he saw her again, he had never seen her wearing anything aside from clothes which covered her completely.

"The orphanage," she answered, already opening the door.

"Oh," he said, following her to the door. He saw her turn around to face him from the door with an expression on her face as if ready to argue against his company, but after long pause, she mumbled "Fine" and went out. She must be avoiding all contacts and unnecessary conversation with him for her to back down that easily.

He let her walk a certain distance ahead from him. "I just have to stop by the bakery first," she said, not looking back at him. He simply offered silence as an answer. She picked up two boxes from the bakery, the baker commenting that it was an order that was one week late which she profusely apologized to reasoning that she had been down with the flu. Naruto simply kept silent through the conversation, trying to respect Sakura's prerogative to lie about her condition. But he insisted on carrying the boxes which seemed to contain a cake on one and a bunch of cupcakes on the other.

His past busy life had kept him from visiting the orphanage, and he thought it was only the second or third time he had been there. He wasn't raised in an orphanage, which most people assumed about him, instead the Third Hokage looked after him in a rundown apartment. A rotund woman welcomed the two of them as they passed the gate. She met them halfway and put her arms around Sakura which she welcomed. For a moment, Naruto was scared that her arms would snap Sakura's like a twig. He let out an unnoticed sigh as the women let go with smiles on their faces.

"Sakura-san, it's so good to see you again. You haven't been here a while. The children have been sad," the woman squeaked, her high pitched voice being a sharp contrast to her appearance.

"I'm so sorry, Akane-san. I've been," Sakura started before getting interrupted by the woman.

"Oh, do not worry about that. It's already too much trouble for you to constantly visit," she said.

"Oh no no, not at all. By the way, this is Naruto," she said, gesturing to him. "He uhm, a, he's…" she started, obviously trying to find

something appropriate to address him with. He was about to jump in, putting the boxes he held aside, when the woman called Akane held out her hand for him.

"Pleased to meet you, Naruto-san. My, my, you are as handsome as they say you are. The villagers underplayed you," she said admiringly. Glancing sideways, he could see Sakura bowing her head, as if observing her feet.

He shook the woman's hand and replied from the flattery, "Uhm, thank you, I guess. Nice to meet you too."

"Akane-san, where are they?" Sakura's whisper-like voice interjected.

Akane-san was already picking up the boxes that they brought as she replied, "Oh, they're out playing in the backyard. Why don't you go ahead while I prepare these for the kids?" The woman waved as Sakura led the two of them back.

There were probably about twenty children around the backyard. There were old-looking swings and two sandboxes, but other than that, it was just a plain backyard. The children noticed Sakura and immediately ran towards them, some little girls even clung immediately to Naruto's leg.

"Sakura-chan! Sakura-chan! We missed you!" the children yelled, each wanting a hug from her. Sakura had a certain smile that he did not remember before.

"I missed you too, Yuuki. You too Shin," she said to a brown-haired girl and a black-haired boy while putting her arms around them.

"Ne, ne, Sakura-chan! Who's the handsome knight?" one black-eyed girl asked her while still putting her small arms around his leg.

"I'm Naruto. Hi!" he said in reply while holding out his hand. Some of the kids tackled him as a greeting while giggling uncontrollably and

repeating his name.

"I don't like the knight. Beh!" the girl Sakura addressed Yuuki replied while holding on to Sakura's arm and sticking out her tongue to him.

"Me too," the other one named Shin agreed. Before he could ask what was going on, Sakura interfered.

"Hey, that's not nice," she said to them quietly then faced the other kids who were still tackling him. "Hey kids, I brought cupcakes. Go get them, they're with Akane-san," she said. One by one they cheered away, wanting to get a brownie first. The only ones left while Naruto rearranged himself were the two children with Sakura who apparently did not like him.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "The kids are very enthusiastic when there's new company," she added.

"No worries," he smiled to her. And she smiled back. A warm feeling wrapped his chest in contentment. It was the first proper conversation they had that didn't involve house rules. His attention went back to the boy and the girl who were currently turning away from them. What was their problem? Then the girl, Yuuki, started talking.

"Sakura-chan, Shouta won't come out of the room," the girl said in her little voice.

"He's that mad, huh?" she replied. "Is he in his room now?"

"Yeah," Shin answered. The boy reminded Naruto a bit of Sasuke, back when he didn't have a stick up his ass. He seemed quietly enamoured with Sakura.

Soon, the children started coming back with Akane-san, each with a cupcake in hand.

"Children, what are you going to say to Naruto-san and Sakura-chan?" Akane-san reminded them.

"Thank you!" they said in unison, while Sakura merely smiled back. She seemed really happy with the kids.

"Akane-san, can I visit Shouta for a bit?" Sakura asked, standing up.

"Sure, sweetie. He's been waiting for you. I'm sure he missed you the most," the woman answered.

As Sakura left, most of the kids had returned to playing, some still eating their cupcakes. Naruto sat down in a nearby bench with Akane-san.

"Akane-san, uhm, can I ask you a question?" Naruto inquired. Akane-san nodded in reply. "The kids seem to refer to me as a knight. Do they call other visitors like that?" he said, curious.

The woman seemed to ponder his question for a moment before lightly laughing. "Oh! Come to think of it, you do look like the knight! Just like in the story," she said, her voice still high-pitched. Naruto was starting to get used to it.

"What story?" he asked.

"The one Sakura-san tells the children about how the legend of the cherry blossom," she answered. Seeing that Naruto did not know the said story, she continued. "She even painted pictures when she told the story. Do you want to hear it?"

"Sure, please," he said, grateful.

"Once upon a time in a kingdom far away, there were two peasant children, a boy and a girl. The boy had blue eyes and blond hair while the girl had pink hair. They were best friends ever since they were young," she paused, gazing at Naruto, as if trying to comprehend his expression, then continued.

"They grew up falling in love with each other. When they became a little older, the kingdom's guards noticed that the boy had great fighting skills, so they appointed him as a knight. The girl, however, only sold flowers for a living. The knight grew to fight many battles and won the kingdom many victories. While he fought, the peasant girl remained in the kingdom, praying for his safety while selling flowers to get through the day. After a great battle, the king wanted the knight to be his successor, so he offered his only daughter to marry the knight. The knight declined the offer, only wanting to be with his peasant girl. He later told this story to the peasant girl and asked her to marry him," she paused again, looking at the children and reprimanding a boy for pulling on another girl's pig tails.

"Where was I? Oh, the peasant girl, realizing that the knight was sacrificing too much for her, said no to his proposal and pretended that she was in love with another knight. She sent him away, telling him that she did not want to be friends with him anymore. The knight, heartbroken, left the peasant girl, and having nothing left, decided to marry the beautiful princess and become the king. But the peasant girl was heartbroken too. On the day of the knight's marriage, she cried in a meadow of flowers. A magical witch appeared then, one that the knight had previously defeated, intending to get revenge on the knight. The peasant girl begged for the witch to not harm her beloved knight. The witch, because she was a being of proposals and bargains, agreed not to harm the knight, if the peasant girl would give her her beautiful pink hair along with her life. The peasant girl agreed. As the witch took her life away the same day, a teardrop fell from her cheek. From that spot in the ground grew the first cherry blossom tree which grew high and mighty, looking over the kingdom, and always blooming for her beloved knight. The end," said Akane-san. She was a bit breathless.

The whole time, Naruto had not noticed that he was steadily fisting his hands on his sides, captivated by the story."No wonder the kids hate the knight," he said lamely, not finding any other words to say.

"Sakura-san said that the children must not hate the knight. It was not his fault, because the peasant girl did not give him any choice. Anyway, the story's a lot better when Sakura tells it with all the colorful pictures and her beautiful voice. She draws a very nice portrait of the cherry blossom tree," the woman finished with a smile.

Naruto remained silent after that, trying to grasp the intensity of what he was feeling. Why shouldn't the children hate the knight? He was an insensitive jerk who left didn't believe in his peasant girl enough to know that she really loved him and was only saying no because she wanted him to have more. He did not care enough to ask more questions.

"Naruto-san… are you okay?" the high-pitched voice inquired as he was shaken out of his thoughts. He must have been staring off for quite a few minutes there. "I'm sure Sakura-san based the knight's appearance on you because you're so handsome," Akane-san added, probably trying to make him feel a little less uncomfortable.

"Uhm, who is Shouta anyway?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

"He's this boy who is really attached to Sakura-san. He was the first one who became so close to her ever since she came here two years ago. See, it was his birthday a week ago and Sakura-san kind of promised she'd stop by so they can celebrate," the woman explained. A week ago was when all the craziness were happening and Sakura stayed at home probably to recover and look a bit better. It dawned on him. That was why she was trying to catch up on as much rest as possible, so she could visit the children.

"He hasn't talked much or eaten since then. He's pretty upset. You know kids," Akane-san added.

"Akane-san, do you mind if I go meet Shouta myself?" he asked.

"Not at all. Go ahead. His room's on the third room to your left," she directed.

Naruto reached the room and found Sakura kneeling beside the bed in the middle of the room, her hands on top of the lump in the bed, covered with a blanket. Shouta, the boy, was not responding to her and kept his back turned to her.

"Shouta…" he heard Sakura said painfully.

"I'm so sorry I was late, sweetie. Please forgive me," she tried soothingly. "It's just that Sakura-chan's been a little sick. I didn't for you to catch what I have so I didn't come last week. Please Shouta?"

Nothing could be heard for a while as Sakura waited for the little boy's reply. Sakura sighed and asked one more time. "You're not really talking to me, are you?" Another silence.

"Okay. Your cake's out there by the way. You should have some. It's your favorite flavour," she said as she placed a kiss on the boy's forehead.

Sakura turned around towards the door with a pained expression on her face. Naruto leaned on the doorframe, trying to find something to say. As soon as Naruto made room so Sakura could step out of the room, she swayed a little and had to place her hand on the nearest wall. On instinct, Naruto placed his hands gently on her shoulders, steadying her.

"Are you okay?" he asked worriedly.

"Yeah, I'm just a bit woozy," she replied, moving slightly away from his hold while pressing a hand over her forehead. She let her bangs down over her forehead now. He saw her forehead as she steered her bangs to her right. "I guess we better go," she said.

"Okay." Sakura bade a quick goodbye to the children while promising to visit soon. She looked both weary and lonesome as they approached the gate.

"He'll forgive you," Naruto said, failing miserably to make her feel better.

"I don't know about that. I promised and then I…" she stopped in her stride, covering her face with one hand.

" *I broke every promise I made that day.* "

He was rooted to the spot, caught between saying something to reassure her or apologizing himself for making her feel that she was unable to keep promises.

"I'm sorry, Sakura-chan."

How he wished he was the one who said that. But it came from another voice behind. Both of them turned around to find a blue-eyed boy nearing tears.

"I didn't mean to make you sad. I'm not mad. Please don't be sad, Sakura-chan," the boy cried as he made his way to hug Sakura's lower body.

"Hey. It's okay, Shouta," Sakura hushed, patting the boy's back affectionately then kneeling to be face to face with the boy. "You forgive me, sweetie?" she asked with a smile. Shouta nodded vigorously while putting his arms around the frail woman's neck.

From where he stood, it seemed simple. It was easy even, for a child to apologize to her and forgive her. He wondered why it had become so difficult for him.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked again as he stood in the kitchen while Sakura made her tea.

"Yes, I'm sure," she said, sounding annoyed. She held her teacup in one hand as she moved towards her room. Naruto could only watch as she slowly walked towards her destination. Her face was paler

tonight. He wondered how she slept at nights. Did she take medications? Did she need more blankets to keep her warm? He would ask Shizune or her doctor in the morning about that. He didn't want to be utterly useless anymore. His gaze returned to Sakura who stopped in the middle of turning the knob of her bedroom door.

"Do you know how Ino is these days?" she asked meekly.

"Oh. She's… okay. She and Shikamaru are expecting their firstborn soon," he answered. Naruto had barely talked to Shikamaru after finding out what happened with Sakura. Ino had a delicate pregnancy so she had to stay at home with Shikamaru by her side.

"Really? That's nice," she said, her back to him.

"D-Do you, uhm, want to visit her? I can arrange it for you," he said without thinking. Naruto didn't know what happened between the two of them. Like him, Ino had not talked about Sakura for the past three years. She married Shikamaru a year ago with Temari as the maid of honor. Not once did she mention inviting Sakura, and not once did he inquire. Another surge of guilt went through his system as he waited for Sakura's answer.

"That would be wonderful. Friday?" she said. He couldn't see her expression, but her tone implied that she was excited.

"Sure," he said with a grin. It reminded him of how they used to be. Although now, there was this huge gap between them that he was afraid was never going to go away.

"I don't hate you, Naruto," she said suddenly, catching Naruto off-guard. "I just got tired of being the burden. And all of you have so much in store for you. I just… I just can't bear the thought of weighing down anyone," she said, one palm flat on her door.

"You're not…" he said, ready to disagree.

"I just… I don't hate you," she interrupted, already closing the door, leaving Naruto stunned in the dead silence that followed.

To be continued…

So that's that. Do you like it? It's only natural that there are tons of awkward moments here. I mean, come on, it's hard. In order to excite you more, you'll be happy to know that more characters will be part of the next chapters. *Hint hint: Ino, Shika, maybe even Sai* Who knows? Anyway, what do you think of this update? Please let me know through your reviews.

Thank you so much for reading this story and for your continuous support. I mean it. Peace out. :)

Episode

Disclaimer: No. Last time I checked, not a part of Naruto belongs to me.

I'm baaaaaaack! Did anyone miss me? How long has it been? Six months? Kami, it's been so long.

I'm sorry guys, for being so late. I've been so busy with real life these days. And my precious muse was missing for quite a while. I had to nurse her and all so she'd like me again. But like I promised, I won't be abandoning this story. I was amazed at how people were still reviewing the previous chapters until now. You guys are the most amazing readers.

Thank you for reading this story and for the reviews, both good and bad. Some of you have been complaining that my characters are OOC, but I guess we'll just have to agree to disagree. I write fanfics not only because I love the anime, but also because I want to show how the different characters react in different situations. What makes them happy, what makes them break, what makes them do what they do. But that doesn't mean that I don't keep what makes them who they are in tact. So anyway, just read this story as somewhat of a possibility. Man, I hope I'm making sense.

I hope you guys continue to enjoy my updates. And as usual, please review this chapter. My gratitude to you all. :D

Chapter 15: Episode

I have dreamed of you so much

have walked

talked

slept so much with your phantom

that perhaps the only thing left for me is to become a phantom among phantoms

a shadow a hundred times more shadow than the shadow

the moves and goes on moving

brightly, over the sundial of your life.

- Robert Desnos

"You don't trust me?" he heard a voice say through the small opening of the stoic doctor's door.

"You know better than that. It's not just me. Neji too," the voice replied, its volume significantly louder than the other voice.

"Then both of you don't trust me?" a small feminine voice questioned again.

"We don't trust you when you're with him. You're condition's not getting better and you know that. Being around him will make it much much worse." That ended the conversation. A stabbing feeling told Naruto that he was the one being referred to by Haji, who had not bothered to keep his voice discrete and who definitely knew that Naruto could hear what he and his patient Sakura were talking about. It was her weekly check-up today, and the arrangement was, as long as she was able to, Sakura, escorted by Naruto, would visit the hospital for her blood work and chakra work-up. While he was there, Naruto also had his work-up done by the Fifth Hokage who seemed to avoid contact with Sakura.

Sakura's doctor did not like him one bit, that part Naruto knew, as he could not help but pick up bits and pieces of their conversation while he waited for Sakura in the hallway. After all, he was shinobi. The

last week that he had spent with Sakura and occasionally with her doctor was by far one of the longest of his life. It was filled with words unsaid, loss of context, and lingering disdain which were for the most part, courtesy of Haji. Sakura often sighed, and he often gritted his teeth, frustrated with the situation. There were so much more needed to be said, needed to be settled, and yet Naruto knew wholeheartedly that it was not what Sakura needed.

He felt pathetic, hanging around Sakura's place, wondering if she needed the help that he hoped he could give her. And he knew that the only thing he was causing was making Sakura so tense all the time. It was like she was always watching her back when she was near him, not that she thought he was danger to her, but it was something else, something he could not put his finger to. Haji knew that too. She had already said that she didn't hate him, and maybe she was right. She doesn't hate him because what he did deserved more than hate.

He had wondered a thousand times this week that maybe it was better if he had joined the mission to retrieve the woman who could heal Sakura, instead of lounging around her only to make her incredibly uncomfortable. But something told him that he owed it to both Sakura and himself to stand by her. For all they knew, maybe the cure lies with his body. Even if it's not the right thing to do, it was something that he needed to do, even if it took everything he had. It could break both of them, but hell, they were already broken on so many levels.

Sakura slowly came out of Haji's office, carefully fixing her sleeve. It was a habit of hers now, as if she was protecting something precious that was literally up her sleeve. "Are you done?" Naruto asked politely, lightly brushing his fingers through his hair, trying to fix his eyes on her. Her handsome doctor walked behind her, his hands tucked in his coat. For some reason, Haji reminded him of Sasuke, only more sarcastic and openly antagonistic, at least to him. Sakura casually calls him "Mom", but he doubts that if anyone else,

especially him, referred to Haji with that term, they would be in for a terrible attack from his vicious stare and words.

"Are you going anywhere after this?" Haji asked in his baritone voice, barely acknowledging Naruto's presence with a curt nod. He emitted an air of authority whenever he was around people, and yet Sakura seems to not notice.

"No. We're… going to visit a friend first," Sakura said, smiling at him. That merited a skeptical silence from the long-haired doctor. "I'll be fine… Trust me," she added, immediately stopping any objections from Haji and went on her way with the blond shinobi.

They walked in silence as usual, though she fidgeted the whole way. He was starting to get used to her stride now. She liked to walk slow, telling him to walk ahead, but he stubbornly insisted on lingering for her. He was kind of her bodyguard after all.

"Don't be nervous," he assured her with a smile, while she tried to smile back. They were headed to Ino and Shikamaru's house, which was located in the Nara clan properties, north of Konoha. Naruto never really knew what happened between Sakura and Ino, but he knew that Sakura missed her best friend. Ino had been nervous too when Naruto met with her and her husband to set up Sakura's visit. Ino Nara was already 28 weeks into her delicate pregnancy and was advised since the beginning to stay put so as not to stress the baby. Shikamaru, the worried husband and father-to-be that he was, did not think of the visit to be such a good idea, but given how things ended with the two women, his wife insisted to finally see her best friend after three years. "Tell her I'll look forward to seeing her," the teary-eyed blonde had said.

"I wonder if she's the same," Sakura pondered with a serious face, taking her time with walking.

"She's the same. Though she seems to have lost that blabbermouth trait of hers. She's..quieter. Probably from spending too much time with Shikamaru. But don't tell her I said that," he grinned, while

gazing at the clouds. Sakura chuckled quite too quietly in return. It was a good thing that it wasn't too sunny today. It was a good day for a walk, indeed.

"Wow, you're big, Ino," Sakura had said when Ino answered the door. The pregnant blonde was already crying as she tenderly put her arms around green-eyed woman. Sakura was not crying, instead she smiled into Ino's shoulders, grateful for the warmth. "And you look like a tooth pick, forehead."

"You didn't tell me," Ino finally said while Sakura sighed. Shikamaru and Naruto had given the two of them time to talk by preparing the tea. After a good ten minutes of asking how each other were, she finally pointed out to the elephant in the room, well, in the garden really. The Naras were famous for their beautiful gardens, and Ino and Shika's house had a big one. Because she couldn't work during her pregnancy, Ino turned her efforts to tending to the garden. It looked so serene and amazing after seven months of Ino's obsessive tending. No wonder she looked so peaceful as she sat in the wooden chair in front of Sakura, stroking her round belly.

"I had to do this on my own. Plus, things wouldn't have turned out the way it did if I told you," Sakura answered, keeping her eye on her belly. "You seem happy," she added. "That's good."

"I am," the blonde answered. "You're sick," she added miserably.

"I am," Sakura said, her eyes finally settling on Ino's sad ones. "I don't want you to be mad, Ino," she continued, as if sensing what her friend was about to say.

"I'm not! I just… I could have helped you if you told me. And I…" the blonde contended as her voice rose slightly.

"No one could have," the pink-haired woman interrupted. "And I would've dragged you down. I would never let you sacrifice this life just to be tangled with mine. Please, let's just not talk about what ifs.

It's a bit counterproductive," she finished with a smile, urging her friend to let it go.

"We can't just not talk about this, Sakura. I mean, what about you and Naruto? Have you ever talked about this?" Ino urged while trying to find a more comfortable angle to sit.

"He… understands. At least I hope he does," Sakura whispered.

"He won't be able to unless you explain it to him. What you did, not telling him, keeping it a secret all this time. It's like you didn't give him a say in this matter. I mean, I can understand why you didn't tell me, but him? You decided for his life, and that's not fair," Ino finished, almost breathless from speaking. A long pause followed. She had feared that she crossed a line. But Sakura was her best friend whom she had not talked to in a long time, the least she owed to her was her honest opinion.

"I was the reason why he suffered. And when you're at that point when all you want is for the people you care about to be happy, it's easier to take yourself out of the equation, I guess… I already knew he'd hate me for it, so it's easier too," Sakura argued.

"Is it easier?" the pregnant woman asked, knowing that it was a half-truth. All she got for an answer was a sighing Sakura who consistently got interested at the ground. "Listen, I'm sure you didn't come here so we could argue. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too. For everything. And for what it's worth, I missed our arguments. It's kind of refreshing," Sakura replied with a small smile. Ino knew that it wasn't worth it to drag Sakura into that kind of conversation. It was her choice. She was always so stubborn.

"But…" Ino started sheepishly.

"Buuuut? What now, Ino?" Sakura groaned.

"Last question," the blonde requested.

"Fine," she acquiesced.

"Why'd you do it?"

"Hmmm," she sighed before she answered. "Do you remember when we were five? We wanted to be princesses. When we were ten, we wanted to be the greatest shinobi. When I was fourteen, I wanted to vanquish evil by Sasuke's side. You wanted that too. Then he left me and Naruto. It took a long time to realize what I really wanted. In the end, I just wanted to be Sakura-chan." She chuckled. "It's funny how life bites you in the ass like that, making you think you wanted one thing but really wanting another."

"Sakura…"

"It's okay. I just want him to have things he deserves," she said, looking over the colorful flowerbed. "Anyway," she said in a high-pitched voice, changing the subject. "Can I see pictures of the wedding?"

Ino smiled sadly. Sakura used to be such an emotional girl, never afraid to open up, but now she could see how tight her hold was on her emotions. The blonde felt guilt and immense empathy towards her best friend. She could only imagine how painful it was to go through what she's been through, even more painful without someone to help her. When she learned the truth from her husband, she felt stupid for even thinking that Sakura would ever do something so selfish just to get ahead. But that was life, people each had their own, and most of the time they would easily choose the path to happiness for themselves. That's what happened with her. What was worse was, like Naruto, they chose to believe what they were told about Sakura. She didn't reach out, so neither did they. Now it was all messed up.

"Ino?" Sakura called her attention, slightly waving her hand. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm sorry," she assured. "Of course, you can look at it later and…" she said when Sakura's frail hand reached to hers.

"Ino, I'm fine. Stop thinking about it. Things happen," she said reassuringly. Same old Sakura, always knowing what her blonde friend was thinking about.

"I'm sorry… I'm just.. really sorry. I didn't even invite you," she said, her tears falling on her hand that was resting on her stomach. She stopped when her pink-haired friend stood up from her seat and kneeled in front of Ino, her frail frame ghastly compared to the glowing frame of the pregnant woman. "You're not supposed to be stressed, remember? Shika would be mad at me for making you cry," she said, her slightly cold hand wiping tears from Ino's cheek.

"Please. That man wouldn't dare," she said, still sobbing. "It was a beautiful wedding. You should have been there."

Sakura patted her blushing cheek. "I'm sure it was," she smiled, returning to her seat. They sat in silence after that, each grateful for each other's company. In a way, Ino understood, at least some of it. She was sure that she would've done the same if Shikamaru was in that situation.

"Can I ask you a question?" Sakura asked, a light tone in her voice. Ino slightly nodded. "What's it like?"

"To what?"

"Make love?"

"…"

Ino laughed heartily after a short silence, amazed at the innocence of the question. "Well, he's laaaazy. I mean, I had to do all the work, you know? He's just. Ugh! God, you'd think he'd give a little more effort. That guy…." she joked, then stopped when she noticed that Sakura wasn't laughing, instead smiling longingly. "It's amazing.

When you're with the one, it's amazing." That's when Ino realized how Sakura's time stopped three years ago. "That's great," Sakura said, the corners of her mouth upturned in a genuine smile.

"It really is. Now, enough about birds and bees. You wanna talk baby names?"

"How bad is it?"

"Really bad. She's really sick," Naruto replied, as he and Shikamaru watched Ino and Sakura talk on the garden. The tea set laid forgotten on the counter. The two men felt it was better to let the blonde and pink-haired woman have time to themselves. Naruto sighed.

"You're sighing more now," commented Shikamaru. "I don't know what to do," Naruto replied, leaning into the counter and bowing his head.

"Nobody does, you idiot," said the Nara, adjusting the knot in his hair, watching closely how his wife laughed at something Sakura said.

"You know, I've always known that I would screw up many times in my life, but I never thought I would screw up this badly," the blue-eyed blond said, looking at Sakura's pleased face while she talked with her friend. She had always smiled whenever he tried to talk to her, but he knew that it wasn't genuine happiness. He worried, because she never showed pain or even a slight amount of suffering. She was pretending. So he pretended in return.

"I'm sorry, Naruto," Shikamaru said, interrupting the blond's thoughts. "Huh?" Naruto wondered.

"I could've helped. But with Ino's pregnancy, and the complications. I just… chose," Shikamaru finished, fiddling with the teapot angle on the tray. "It's fine. Sakura has a fit with all the people trying to help

her now anyway. She's a piece of work when it comes to that area," Naruto answered. Now, both of them were sighing.

"You're doing the right thing, Naruto."

"I can only hope that I am."

"It's been lovely seeing the three of you," Sakura said, while gently patting Ino's belly. They were saying there farewells on the great oak door of the Nara house. Shikamaru hovered behind his wife, while Naruto waited for Sakura on the porch.

"Of course, Sakura. When the baby comes, I'll be the one to visit you," Ino said affectionately. Sakura merely nodded. "That would be nice," the pink-haired woman said, as she started towards her blond companion.

"Sakura," Shikamaru gently called. "Yes?" she asked. "We actually haven't asked anyone, but we would be honored if you would be our child's godmother," the Nara said, grinning shyly.

Sakura's expression was unreadable, but in a good way. Naruto couldn't help but grin himself as Sakura stuttered her reply. "A-are you sure? I mean, that's, that's amazing," Sakura exclaimed in glee. "Of course! Of course we're sure," Ino said as loudly as her friend, hugging her once again then gazing lovingly at her husband. He had said what his wife wanted to say. It amazed Naruto how in tune the couple were. No matter how incompatible they seemed at the beginning, eventually people knew how they fit each other, ragged edges and all.

"The way home is over there," the blond pointed out as Sakura went to the wrong direction, her long skirt following her stride.

"I need to stop to the book store and…" she stopped mid-sentence as she unsteadily swayed to her side. It took a split second before Naruto was at her side, gently grabbing her arm to steady. "Are you

okay?" he asked worriedly, still holding her arm. His hold had lifted a part of her long sleeve and what he saw made him woozy himself. Beneath the fabric of the sleeve was an enlarged grey vein. He could feel from his touch that it was bulging abnormally. Sakura immediately pulled her sleeve up, leaving Naruto's hold.

He was ready to ask the question when she interrupted him. "I'm-" she started. Irritated, the blonde decided to finish her sentence for her, knowing full well what she was going to say. "Fine. Yeah, I've heard." The pink-haired woman, sensing her companion's irritation turned her back on him and started to walk rapidly. "That's right. I am."

They reached the bookstore without any more "incidents" on Sakura's part, while Naruto stomped and watched her like a hawk the whole time. Why was she being so difficult? If she felt even slightly sick, she knew better than to hide it. Sakura ignored him while picking out books and after they left the bookstore.

"What did you buy?" Naruto asked in an almost insincere tone. He was trying, Kami, he was trying to be nice. He didn't know why, but Sakura's behavior was seriously pissing him off.

"Some storybooks for my godchild, and some novels and poetry for when he or she is older," she said without turning to him.

"Then why did you leave them there?" he asked, increasingly curious. He had noticed just now that she didn't bring what she bought.

"Well, I had them delivered for when the baby's born," she said thoughtfully. "Why not just…" Naruto started loudly, then continued his sentence, realizing something, "bring them yourself?" he finished lamely.

"Just in case," she said quietly, keeping her hair from being blown by the warm wind. "She's not due in two months, after all."

"You don't believe you can be cured?" the blond blurted out, not realizing he was gritting his teeth all the way.

Sakura stopped, turned to his blue eyes and replied. "I believe that if it's my time, then it's my time." Sakura would have walked quite a distance before Naruto followed her. He waited for him to be beyond hearing distance before punching the wall beside him.

"But it's not your time."

It was so hot, burning, smothering the breath out of her lungs. She opened her eyes and saw the blur of her white pillow. Her limbs felt like they were being pulled apart and her mouth was too dry to be able to swallow. She had felt this a thousand times, and yet it was still as painful, if not more. It was happening again.

It took all her strength to rise from her previous sleeping position while her limbs burned. She tried to suppress the fits of cough that were threatening to break out from her mouth. She wasn't sure how long it took, but it was a long time before she could reach with trembling hands the red medicine bottle that was by her lamp. The trembling worsened as she struggled to open the heavy bottle. She hoped Naruto was already sleeping, because the last thing she needed was his hovering. It felt like forever went by before she twisted the cap, only to find that it was empty.

"Dth…" she started to curse. But that wouldn't help, would it? She could barely speak out anyway with all the trembling. She reached a hand to her forehead. Even she could tell that if she didn't keep her temperature, Haji would make sure Neji knew how she suffered a convulsion because she forgot to get her meds and he would yell. He would yell a lot.

Think, she told herself, before her blood literally boiled from the heat. Ice. That was it. She needed an ice cold bath, just enough to get her through the night. Then in the morning, Haji would take care of it. But

the problem was ice was in the kitchen. The water in the bath tub would not be cold enough.

The clock chimed in midnight. She shuddered, keeping her blankets tight around herself. She needed to be quiet. Leaning on the wall, she kept her pace as she neared her bedroom's door. Heaving a deep breath, she willed herself to turn the cold knob. There were approximately six steps that she needed to take to reach the refrigerator, with practically no lights on. She had to do it quickly or else she'll pass out. And that would not be a pretty scene for her blue-eyed housemate to find. One baby step at a time, she told herself. She had done this for three years, she can do it again. Three steps into the kitchen as she groped her way, sliding her trembling hands through the furniture as quietly as she can. Her breathing is more labored now. Two more steps. She was gripping the sink now. Maybe she was going to make it to the fridge after all. She can reach out to the handle now. Just a little more.

And then.

"Sakura?" a voice asked, sleepiness evident from its tone.

Damn it.

He scrambled immediately to her side as she wretched her guts out on the sink. "What's wrong?" he asked in a frenzy, supporting her back, desperately trying to soothe it. But it proved to be hard. He could feel her spine and rib from the touch.

Naruto used his free hand to pry away the hair from her face, while Sakura turned her head away, evading him. His heartbeat raced. She turned around while he blocked her way, putting his hand on her forehead. Kami, her temperature was off the roof.

"You're burning up," he exclaimed. The sick woman ignored him, turning to her side to reach the fridge. Naruto followed her direction, hovering over her, trying to support her frame. She raised her hand

to his the fabric of his shirt on his chest. He felt no force, but he guessed she was trying to push him away.

"Like hell I am," he said, stubbornly wrapping an arm around Sakura's torso, pulling him to her so he could open the fridge.

"Mph…" he heard her whimper. Leaning his head towards her, which was currently pressed to his chest, he asked. "Huh?" he asked, patience wearing off. "No!" she tried to scream.

"Well, that's too bad cause I'm not letting you go here. What do you need? Are your meds here?" he spoke quickly. She was trembling so badly in his arms, as he furiously eyed the contents of the fridge. "Please Sakura, don't be stubborn now," he pleaded while he ran his arm up and down Sakura's frame. He was burning up and yet she was shuddering in his arm. "Please," he whispered.

"B-bath. Ice," she mumbled before closing her eyes, barely conscious. That increased both the realization the panic within the blond. He needed to act fast. He gathered as much ice as he could while he balanced Sakura on his other side. In a swift stride, he got both Sakura and the ice now towards her room, where her bath was, barely aware that he was breaking the woman's one great rule. In under ten seconds, they were in Sakura's bathroom, Sakura deposited on the wall beside the bathroom sink, while Naruto busied to prepare the cold water in the tub, his pajamas already wet from his one-man commotion. The water was not cold enough so he formed some quick seal to further lower the temperature.

He hoped that he got just the right amount of cold, or else it would be really bad. The temperature should be cold enough to normalize Sakura's temperature but not too much to freeze the blood in her veins. He willed himself to calm down as he gently patted Sakura's cheeks, trying to get her to wake up. "We need to get you in the tub now," he whispered. Thankfully, she opened her cloudy eyes as to acknowledge his voice. No need for modesty now, Naruto, he thought.

He gently pulled away her sweaty blanket which revealed Sakura wearing a thin spaghetti-strapped night gown. He did not know what to feel as he saw for the first time Sakura's frail body uncovered. She could have passed for a corpse. What caught his attention were her arms. The bulging veins that he had noticed before were all over both her arms. They were like bruises, purpled and horrific embossed on her thin arms. It was like kunais were purposely shoved in her veins, not to mention the dark spots all over the underside of her elbow, evidence of needle shots.

He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth while pulling the pink-haired woman in his arms and bringing her to the tub. He gently lowered her to the tub, one arm around her upper body while the other supported the underside of her knees. He himself had to go into the tub to properly position her. Sakura let out a painful groan as he did so. Naruto got out of the tub, part of his hair and his whole front wet, as he kneeled beside the ceramic to keep Sakura's face from sinking down. A second of contact with the water got him shuddering out of his wit. He could only imagine that it was a million worse for Sakura.

A sharp gasp came from Sakura as she felt Naruto's hands holding her shoulders. Her misty eyes focused on him. Naruto didn't know what type of expression Sakura saw from him, but right now, he was in panic. He waited for Sakura to form her words, leaning his head closer to hers.

"Out," she said, her voice hoarse from vomiting. When he didn't reply, she repeated her word in a louder voice. "Out!" She flailed around the cold tub, pushing his hands away and pointing out the door. So before she hurt herself, he stood up, got some thick towels and clothes in her cabinet and put on the dry spot near the tub. "Fine. But I'll be waiting outside. Call me when you're finished, and I'll call your doctor," he said, gently closing the door.

A second after creating an equally wet clone to send for Haji and he was leaning on the frame of the bathroom door, his breathing labored from what had happened. He increased his chakra flow to

his ears so he could hear Sakura's breathing on the other side. The blue-eyed blond needed to make sure she wasn't drowning in there.

He looked around Sakura's room and turned on the light, not bothering that water was pooling where he sat. Books were stacked everywhere, her bed was unmade, while bottles of medicines laid on her nightstand. On her bed were pieces of tissue paper tainted in red. Blood. The medicine bottles obscured the picture frame in the middle, containing a photo of Naruto and Sakura after the first time they defeated Kakashi-sensei. He closed his eyes and clutched his chest. It was harder to breathe, knowing what Sakura tried to hide from him.

Rustling from the other room informed him that his clone and Dr. Haji Yuy had arrived. He scrambled towards the living room to meet the doctor who wore civilian clothes and a subtle hint of worry. Before Naruto could say anything, the long-haired doctor was already rushing past him towards Sakura's bedroom. "Your clone already filled me in. I'll take it from here," he said, turning to him and eyeing his appearance. "Change your clothes and go to bed. I'll probably be here until morning," he continued. That pompous ass, Naruto cursed.

He couldn't count how many times he paced around the house wondering what was happening with Sakura. There was no doubt that Haji was a brilliant doctor, but he's an annoying jerk. It's a miracle how his patient puts up with him. Two, three, four hours passed, and all that had happened was Haji coming out of the room to get things from the kitchen, forbidding him to come into Sakura's bedroom and then shutting the door again. It was unbelievable, what had happened earlier. It had shaken him to his core. And it made him realize how little he knew of Sakura's condition. Two more hours passed as exhaustion took over Naruto who slumped on the couch and forced himself to close his eyes and rest.

He opened his eyes to see the rays of daylight enter the living room. His fingers pinched the bridge of his nose as the memory of last night flooded his thought. He still wore his thin shirt and pajamas

which were now dry. He could hear sounds from the kitchen as he turned to Sakura's bedroom to see if she's awake.

Sakura sat across the kitchen table facing Naruto. Tiredness was etched on her pale face. She talked quietly to the doctor who was busying himself making a cup of coffee. He too looked exhausted. He wouldn't be if he had just bothered to let Naruto helped. When Sakura noticed that Naruto had awaken, she turned to him and asked him to sit down. There was a bowl of instant ramen waiting for him at the table.

"I thought you might want to eat that," she spoke, quietly regarding him with an unreadable expression. "Uh, yeah, thanks," the blond croaked in gratitude, wishing he could take a shower first. "H-how about you? You ate already?" he added. She barely pursed her lips in reply while turning sideways and giving her doctor a look. He couldn't tell what kind for her bangs covered her eyes.

"I'll stop by real quick to my place first to change. I'll come back to bring you to the hospital," he told Sakura before walking off. "I can take her," Naruto suggested, still not touching the ramen, his hands playing with the chopsticks. Haji just regarded him with a stern stare as he closed the door before him. God, he hated that guy.

Naruto kept himself from yelling out "bastard" to the guy as he turned around to the silent Sakura. She was nursing a near empty cup of tea, looking at the ceramic in deep thought. They had never share a meal before. He wondered what was up. Before he could ask, Sakura had beat him to speaking.

"How's Hinata?" she asked, her eyes fixed on her cup.

"I don't know," he answered, surprised with the sudden inquiry. He honestly didn't know how she was. The last time he had seen her was at the wedding. The one time he visited their place before meeting with the Godaime, he had found her things gone. With all the things that's been going on, he barely had the time to check on

her. "How are you feeling?" he asked, remembering what was on his mind before.

Sakura went silent, stroking the sides of her cup. "You should take some time. Work things out with her," she suggested casually, as if she had suggested to try another flavor of instant ramen.

"I really don't know why we're talking about this," he asked, confused at Sakura's sudden interest to talk.

"Your time should be spent with her. I'm going to talk to the Hokage today, request for another shinobi to stay here. If you want, you can visit once a week, whenever…" she couldn't finish her sentence as Naruto interrupted with a slightly raised voice.

"Is that what's this is about?" he asked, clenched fists on the table, the instant ramen ignored in front of him. For the first time in the conversation, Sakura looked directly at him.

"It's not fair that you're putting your life on hold for this, especially not at this point when you're Hokage-in-training, and your fiancé-" she reasoned.

"I'm a shinobi, it's what I do," he butted in.

"I don't' want you to anymore," she said, looking away.

"Then why? I'm doing my job, aren't I? If this is about what happened last night," he stopped midsentence as she started to raise her voice.

"This is about things not working out. You come here pretending that you're okay with all this when -" Oh, he was really pissed off. They were interrupting each other's words now,

"I'M pretending? How about you? You walk around with the comforting thought that it's okay just to wait for death. You refuse to ask for help. And now you're pushing ME, EVERYONE away.

AGAIN. Why don't you be just be honest just this once, huh?" he raged back, standing from his seat to keep himself from breaking the table in half.

The sound of ceramic breaking came to his ears as Sakura stood up herself, fury evident in her eyes that matched his. "You want me to be honest? Fine," she replied in a quiet voice, her rage in control. "I'm going to die. I know that, my doctor knows that, and the Hokage knows that. In two to two and a half months, I'm going to die. Into that time, I'd probably fall into a coma. My kidneys would fail, and then it's downhill from there, the rest of my organ will fail. My doctor would have to pull the plug on my life support. That's how I'm gonna die. And I know that because I've known it in three years. I've accepted it and it's fine with me now. But the last thing I need is you watching me like this. If you stick around longer, you would see how worse I will get," she said, biting her lip tightly to stop from trembling.

"I can handle it," the blond replied, standing his ground.

"I can't," she said in finality. What shook Naruto were not only her words, but her tears, now freely falling from her tired eyes to her white cheeks. "I can't," she repeated, breaking down to her seat. "I'm begging. Please, I can't," she said again, wiping her tears with bony fingers.

That did it. All the strength to argue left Naruto as slumped heavily in his seat, not able to look away from the silently weeping woman. How could he refuse such a request?

He didn't know how long they sat there, until a voice came."Naruto-kun, Sakura-san, are you ready to go to the hospital?" asked the sweet voice of Shizune. Beside her stood Haji, his eyes fixed on his patient. He now wore his usual attire with a pony-tail on his long hair. "Naruto's not coming today," Haji told the medic, who only managed to utter a half-confused "oh". He walked towards the kitchen to clean up the broken tea cup while Shizune helped Sakura get ready in her room.

Naruto was still frozen in his seat, looking at nothing in front of him, barely aware that Shizune had escorted Sakura out of the house. Before the long-haired doctor left the kitchen, he stopped beside Naruto's seat and spoke. "She's been through things you couldn't even imagine. The treatments, the medicine. You've seen her arm. But no matter how painful it got, she never cried." And then he was walking away.

Naruto Uzumaki's curses pierced the quiet of the house. In weeks' time, he had managed to barge into Sakura's life and turn it upside down.

Haji was right. In three years, Sakura never cried. But she cried today.

Because of him.

To be continued…

So do you like my comeback chapter? I hope that you do. Leave your thoughts with me, 'kay? And just so you'd be excited, I'm bringing Sai in for the next chapter. *grins* Til next time!

Lull

Disclaimer: Nah, can't buy rights to Naruto. Can't own him.

So this is a bit late. Again. But I am trying to squeeze writing into my schedule and I hope you kind readers understand. Please bear with me. We will get there, I promise.

So I've been thrilled with your reviews. And as always, I thank each and every one of you.

On bashing: Just one little thing before we go on to this chapter. I just want to make something very clear here. I am not, nor will I ever be, bashing any one of the characters in any of my fics. Not Hinata. Not anyone. I hate character bashing and think that it's a pathetic form of writing, should it even be considered one. I've been receiving reviews and private messages from some readers accusing me of bashing Hinata and her clan and proceeding to inform me that this was a horrible fic and not worth reading. First of all, I don't mind the story being horrible in any reader's opinion. In fact, I respect that. If you don't want to read it, hey, it's fine. But the accusation of bashing, that's where I have a problem with. It took me exactly ten minutes to google and read about character bashing and reaffirm the fact that I am not bashing Hinata in this story (not that I ever intended it). And if some people just took the time to read the very definition of bashing (that's right, look it up. I respect my readers enough to have faith in their google skills) then they'd realize that Hinata and her clan is an integral part of the plot here, and I'm not making her suffer just because I can as a writer and I hate her (which I don't). Just because I like writing NaruSaku fics and personally think that Hinata is not the one for our beloved blond (which I frequently voice in my author's notes) doesn't mean that my readers can go and confuse it with the actual portrayal of the character in the story. I respect readers' love for Hinata. I really do. And I'm not about to offend my readers by bashing her. So please, let that be the end of it. Please.

So there's the end of my rant. I realize I might spark more outrage by writing this (and might lose readers because of it), but hey, I just want to tell my side of the story, and yeah, defend myself a little bit. As long as at least one person reads this, then I'll continue this story. Hell, even if no one reads this, I'll still continue writing. Haha.

So that's all for now. To those who will still be reading this chapter, I hope you enjoy.

Chapter 16: Lull

Hearts, once sunk, go down forever.

- Malaysian Saying

Years and years spent in his profession made Umino Iruka adept to keeping young starting shinobi interested with lessons, especially those that involved what seemed like an eternity of history lectures.

Most kids starting out - those hyperactive ones in particular, and there was always at least one in every class - would always want go straight into the 'cool jutsus' part of the lessons (as one student termed) instead of the 'boring, useless history lessons' (as that same student called it). But history lessons were part of the education that all shinobi must be familiar with. Shinobi need to learn about the village that they would constantly be protecting and would be risking their lives everyday for. Young students might not realize it until they are much older, but learning about how the proud village of Konoha came to be would someday strengthen their disposition to not only be loyal to it, but to cherish it the way a genuine citizen of Konoha would.

This was why the pony-tailed teacher-shinobi would take pains in making sure that his students would take Konoha's history to heart. It held a proud heritage, after all. This did not meant that it was all so easy to get his students to be oh-so-interested with lectures from

history book so old that the first editions' pages were almost crumbling with the slightest touch. Hell, the only reason why Iruka loved history lessons in the academy when *he* was a kid was because it was his nap time. When he became a teacher, he didn't want *his* history lectures to put his students to deep slumber, so he figured out a way to keep the brats on their feet when it came to the dreaded part of the lecture. It took some time but after numerous attempts that involved almost getting on his knees to beg for his kids to listen and distracting them with the promise of teaching them forbidden jutsus (which got him in trouble with the Hokage), Iruka had struck gold, at least as far as he knew.

Instead of him speaking in front of the class and blabbering on about dates and founding fathers, he had let every student tell the a part of history of Konoha the way they understood it, usually in the form of story-telling. Iruka would provide them with the basic reading materials and then the rest was up to them; they can even research and ask for stories from their parents about certain events.

During class time, three to five people will share their own stories about a particular time. This gets most students excited, because they can even use puppets and invent dialogues for their characters. As long as they don't deviate too much from the basic 'plot' of their stories, Iruka would let his students do what they want with their story-telling.

After years of using this approach, it had easily become his favorite part of class. Usually, no one got injured, and it helps develop his students' ability to communicate with others. That would qualify as a good lesson in his books. Today was a particularly interesting story-telling time. This time, his 'first-graders' were supposed to tell the story of how the first shinobi came to be. There were numerous theories, of course, most of which were famous around the village and were told by parents as bedtime stories to their children. One of his students, however, had shared an unheard version of the story. This caught Iruka's attention - who had scratched the bridge of his nose where the horizontal scar lay - as well as the rest of the class.

"Once, a Goddess of War had come down from heaven to visit the human world. She played with the animals, basked in the sun, and bathed in the cold water of the river," his student named Kyou started. "A man had stumbled upon the Goddess and was immediately drawn by her charm and beauty. They eventually fell in love with each other and soon, the Goddess would come down every year to be with the man," Kyou continued. The short-haired brunette boy paused to look around the room to find his teacher and classmates looking at him with a slightly confused expression. Shrugging, he proceeded.

"Then came the war. The man had participated for his village but was fatally injured. The Goddess came down to Earth once again for the man only to find him dying and his village defeated. Wanting to save the man, the Goddess decided to give the man her powers. The man recovered while the Goddess of War stayed in Earth for the remaining of her days. Together, they founded the most powerful clan the world has ever seen. After many years of the shinobi world's rise and other clans had been established, the man's clan was still the most powerful among all, children of calamity. Fearing that they were one big threat to the world, the other clans and villages decided to annihilate the clan and - "

"Sensei! Kyou-kun is making up his story!" a girl interrupted Kyou's narration, raising her hand for the teacher's acknowledgement.

"I am not! This story has been passed on to my family for generations!" Kyou defended indignantly.

"It's not in our reading list!" the girl, Asano, replied, sticking her nose in the air.

"But it's what really happened! My grandfather said it even happened here in Konoha," the boy argued, irritated by the girl who always made it a point to be the teacher's pet.

Before anything got out of hand, Iruka had decided to intervene. So much for peaceful story-telling time. "Now, now, children, let's not

fight. It's not even defense class yet," he said stepping beside Kyou to urge the boy to sit down. Said boy stomped towards his seat while Asano stuck a tongue toward him. Thanking the gods that Kyou had merely crossed his arms instead of pulling his seatmate's hair of something, Iruka let out a sigh. Before he could say anything, the bell rang and out went his students in less than ten seconds. The last to go was Kyou who walked unusually slow and stopped in front of Iruka's table.

"It's true what I said. My grandfather told that story to me every night, and he said it was true. My grandpa never lies," the boy stated with a serious expression. He didn't let his teacher reply as he hurriedly ran out the classroom.

"Wait, Kyou!…" Realizing that his student was beyond the reach of his voice, he moaned. "Yare yare…" He slumped heavily in a heap. Swinging his chair around, he wondered if it was time to try a new tactic with his history lectures. Sure, he wanted his students to be involved, but not too involved so as to cause disputes among them. His thoughts were interrupted as he swiveled his chair towards the window and found a familiar figure in the school yard beside the far-off swing. The man sat with his back leaning on the tree, a far-away look on his face.

Standing up from his seat, Iruka started to walk outside to join the man. As he walked towards the man, Iruka realized how much his student had changed. As a teacher, mentor and friend, he had been worried about him, but chose to stay put until he was ready to confide in him.

"It's been a while since you've come here, ne?" the brown-haired teacher-shinobi commented, taking a seat in the grass beside the sullen man.

"I had nowhere to go," the man said, not looking at Iruka but intently looking to the ground.

"So I take it you're not doing so well, huh?" There were only a handful of times that Iruka had seen Naruto in this state. The usually hyperactive blond had rarely let anything dim his cheerful façade. An openly depressed Naruto usually meant business and a lot of consoling.

His brown-haired teacher had been there at the wedding ceremony, had seen the devastated and shocked look on Naruto as his fiancé walked away, had felt his student's pain as he tried to process what exactly had happened at that moment. He had learned what happened with Sakura, the blond, and the Hyuugas around the time most jounins found out about it as well, but unlike the others, he refused to gossip about it or talk to Naruto to confirm it. Naruto knew that he had Iruka to talk to, and when he needed him, he would be there.

The blond shinobi was the master when it came to masking his feelings and permanently plastering an I'm-okay-don't-worry-about-me-I'm-gonna-be-the-next-Hokage smile. And though usually Iruka knew better than to trust that smile, he was also well aware that pestering Naruto with inquiries about his well-being when he clearly wants time to figure it out himself would not do any good. So he waited patiently for the sullen man to speak up, gazing at the orange sky that signaled it was going to get dark in a while.

"They say she can't talk to me right now. Hinata. Her father refuses to let me see her or even send a message," he said, his voice quiet in the background of some children playing some six feet away from them.

"You went to the Hyuugas?" Iruka asked. After the whole wedding interruption, the clan had been a controversial topic around the village. Naruto nodded.

"I wanted to get the truth out of Hiashi. I asked him why he had to do that to Sakura when they knew she was already sick. I was even civil enough not to punch the walls of his tea room, but he just said that I would realize in time that they were doing the right thing. Whatever

the fuck that means," he chuckled mockingly. "I didn't even have the strength to beat him up. He was never going to let me talk to Hinata anyway, so I left. I didn't know where to go. Sakura asked me to leave her alone, and I don't want to go the mine and Hinata's apartment…" the blond said, now cradling his head on his folded arms.

Taking a moment to think, Iruka finally asked, "Naruto, do you know why Hinata did it? You know, finally tell you the truth?"

"Because she loves me," he quickly answered, certainty lacing his retort. "I never doubted her love for me, because I've always felt it. She wouldn't have told me the truth if she didn't. I don't even know if I can be mad at her," he continued, his voice now cracking. "At some point I loved her too. And I was happy with her, wasn't I?"

"You were," Iruka confirmed, forcing a small smile on his lips. It was an honest answer. The years he saw Naruto and Hinata together told him that the woman only wanted to be beside Naruto and keep him happy, and Naruto was happy letting her.

"Hiashi told me that, too. He even said that deep down I already knew that something was wrong with Sakura. I just hated her so much that I chose to believe that she betrayed me and chose Hinata and tried to forget her. He said that *I* wanted to be ignorant and manipulated that way. That I was aware that the only way I could find happiness was with his daughter. That in the end, it was my fault… And you know that worst part? I believed it," he finished, punching the tree behind them. His teacher washed as Naruto retreated his fist from the helpless tree. "But sensei, I'm not that Naruto, am I? I don't hide from the truth. I don't usually screw up *this* bad." That earned a thoughtful silence from his teacher.

The last thing Naruto expected as a response from his beloved teacher was a big whack on the head with the fan he always used on misbehaving students.

"Here's what's gonna happen, Naruto. I'm giving you two more minutes to sulk. And then you're gonna get your shit together and you start doing what you think is right. Sakura's running out of time," the man with the scarred face said in finality, retreating his fan to his vest. The mention of the pink-haired woman seemed to rouse the blond out of his reverie.

"Sensei, that… that hurt!" Naruto screamed for the first time in their conversation, rubbing the spot where said teacher hit him.

"Oh please, you punch that tree and get a bloody hand without wincing and you cry like a girl when I hit you?" he pointed out, which promptly earned a grin from his blond student. Iruka was surprised himself when he had done that, but it was a reflex. He usually ever hits Naruto when he was acting like an idiot and he guessed that this constitutes as Naruto acting like a big fat idiot. They both laughed as the sky continued to bleed its orange hue. Prior to everything that had happened, Iruka knew that Sakura was someone very precious to Naruto whom he trusted and cared about more than anyone. That was why when Naruto managed to cross the line between love and hate for the woman, all hell broke loose and the damage could possibly beyond repair. Naruto needed to find that line again, and figure out once and for all where he wanted to be.

"The bottom line is that as much as ignorance gives you bliss, at some point the truth still catches on and bites you on the ass. You and Sakura need to realize that. Once you're there, there's no turning back. Whatever mistakes you've made are already done, so there's really no point sulking about it, is there?" Iruka already knew that Naruto was aware of this fact, but sometimes you really need to spell things out to the blond.

"No,I know that. B-but" he started, only to be interrupted by his teacher grabbing his shoulders and turning him to face the brown-haired man.

"No buts, Naruto! You have the facts now. So the only thing left to do is do what your heart tells you. As clichéd and cheesy as that

sounds, it's the only advice I can give you," the pony-tailed man spoke. After making sure that it his blond student nodded slightly in agreement, he continued.

"And for what it's worth, I think every person is entitled to make one big mistake in his life. More importantly, he is also entitled to make up for that mistake. That's the part that matters," he said tenderly, making Naruto wonder if his father would have said the same thing to him. Naruto leaned on the tree once again, heaving a deep sigh as if snapping himself out of his brooding mood.

"Now," Iruka said as he stood up, patted the dirt out of his pants and reached one hand to grip Naruto's collar, clumsily getting the blond on his feet. "Move. Your. Ass. And. Get. Going," he said, emphasizing each word with a not so gentle shove to the blond's back.

"Geez Senei. You push like a girl!" Naruto called out as he got going. Brooding and angst never fit well with Naruto anyway.

"And you whine like a girl!" Iruka teased, silently wishing that at the end of the day, his student would be okay.

Infiltration - a subtle one at that - had not been one of his special skills. Not that he couldn't do it, but Naruto always preferred head-on collision with the enemy and making sure that they remembered his name. All the sneaking just never interested him, and usually with his orange outfit, he was always the first one to be spotted on missions anyway. It was a good thing that the hospital was not as secure as, say, the Mizukage's base of shinobi operations. He got in and out in less than ten minutes without anyone noticing. He knew that Sakura's files had been confidential prior to the incidents that happened weeks ago, but now that she was being regularly attended to in the hospital, she now had an accessible file. So Naruto didn't waste time and proceeded to "procure" a copy.

That err… refreshing talk with Iruka-sensei had jolted him out of whatever ass of a dark place he had been in and cleared his mind to realize who he was and what he needed to do. He was Naruto, dammit! Screw what Hiashi thinks, screw the rules, he would do what his heart told him was right. Which led him to "borrowing" Sakura's medical case file and "inviting" himself back to Sakura's currently dark and empty apartment and reading said file with a small flashlight while waiting for her in the living room. He had decided to stay with Sakura, as her bodyguard, companion, whatever she wanted to call it. Any shinobi the Hokage would send to replace him he would just promptly kick out of her apartment.

First, he needed to familiarize himself with Sakura's condition. With all the mumbo jumbo jargon written all over her file, it hadn't been easy. But he understood that she had undergone experimental treatments and drugs - which explained her battered arms with medically-overused veins and evidence of needle injections - and that her usual episodes need to be stabilized as soon as they come. He would have to consult Sakura personally when it came to her episodes. The last time nearly gave him a heart attack, but next time he needed to be calm and ready. Next, he listed and started memorizing Sakura's current medication, their colors, dosage and frequency and time of intake. Assuming Sakura would ever allow him to stay again, he would need to keep his emotions in check. Now that he had time to think analyze what had happened the night before, he remembered how Sakura had been horrified when *he* had been horrified with her state. If the only he could do was panic during those situations, he would be no good to anyone.

The twisting of the silver doorknob caught Naruto's attention and he immediately shoved the folder he was holding under the cushion. He had already broken into Sakura's apartment, there's no need for her to know *immediately* that he had stolen a copy of her file too. Taking a deep breath, and figuring out what he was going to say to her, he realized that he was really nervous.

It was not Sakura, however, who stepped into the apartment and turned the lights on. Naruto peered at the shinobi with a barely-covered torso and a fake smile plastered on his face.

"You," Naruto acknowledged in a neutral tone.

"Me." The shinobi confirmed, tucking the keys in his hand into his pocket.

"Baa-chan sent you to replace me?"

"Always so fast to catch on, Dickless."

"Where's Sakura, Sai?"

"She's still with her doctor when I left Hokage's tower. But she'll probably come home soon," the pale-skinned shinobi replied while walking around, examining the living room. "I see you're still in the habit of entering her house without permission, huh, Dickless? Just like the old times," he continued nonchalantly.

"Hey, those times years ago were different!" the blond blurted out. Before he could help it, there was a tinge of red in his cheeks. He was surprised at how the simple teasing could rouse such a reaction from him, and was even more surprised when he remembered those times long ago when he snuck into Sakura's house and wake her up for missions and/or mostly dates, only to be promptly kicked out with a shove on the ass.

"Uh huh." Sai simply replied.

Trying to reign on his childish behavior, Naruto decided to change the subject. "You just got back from your mission, haven't you? Has Baa-chan briefed you on the details?"

"Hmmm…" Sai mused, gazing at the paintings around the living room. One perched above the bookshelf was of the mountains. "She definitely looks worse than the last time she met with me. We were

going to work on portraits. Though she really needs to buy a new sweater," he said, as if talking to himself.

"What are you - " Sudden realization hit him before he could finish the question. Sakura never owned a sweater the days that they were together. She only wore sweaters when she got sick. Naruto's eyes went red as he gave in to anger. "You knew…" he accused, stalking swiftly to the pale shinobi.

"Hey, wait - " the raven-haired man defended.

Things went black before he knew it.

"That was quite unnecessary, don't you think?"

"…"

"This is going to bruise for weeks."

"…"

"Maybe Sakura's doctor has some cream for the bruising."

"You asshole." They were sitting on the couch now, each sitting on the far side, lest another one-sided assault ensue - the blond being the cause of it.

"And why is that?"

"You knew all along and you just went with her crazy plan to keep it secret, that's why!" Naruto finally growled, giving Sai a look as if to challenge him to defend himself.

"She asked me not to tell," the pale man simply stated, still reeling from the blond's assault.

"You knew she was sick, though!"

"I did."

" Then why agree to it?"

"First of all, can you lower your voice? You're making my headache worse. And second, like I said, she asked me not to tell."

"What kind of ridic-" the blond began, ready to verbally lash out on the shinobi when Sai stood up and faced him.

"Let me stop you right there. The first thing you told me about friendship all those years ago is that a friend honors another friend's request, no matter how ridiculous it is, like when Sakura asks you to wait for the ramen with boiling water to cool down before you eat it," he pointed out as he was ready to catalogue all the lessons on friendship that he and Sakura had proceeded to methodically enlighten him on.

"Don't you see how gravely different this situation is, you idiot!" Naruto moaned, rubbing his face in his hands out of frustration.

A blanket of silence stretched between the two of them. The previous reign that Naruto had with his emotions moments ago had been successfully destroyed by the presence of this Sasuke look-a-like of a teammate. He was as much as a bastard as Sasuke, Naruto concluded.

"She has a list."

"What?" Naruto asked, wondering if Sai had really spoken.

"She has a list of things she wanted to do in the next two years since she was taken out of the shinobi ranks. You were already dating Hinata by then. The sick Hag came to me saying that she wanted to learn to draw, specifically portraits, even if it's just the basics. It was supposed to be a five-session workshop, but by third appointment, she didn't show up. Before I got to check on her, the Hokage had sent me to that two-year mission. As you know, I've only just got

back. Tsunade-sama had filled me in on the details, and the Hag was happy to have me replace you as bodyguard. You did marvelous, by the way," Sai finished, noticing Naruto had come down and had listened intently to his explanation.

"But even if I had stayed, I wouldn't have told you," the pale-skinned man added.

"Why not?"

"Would you have wanted to know?" With Naruto's reaction, Sai realized that his skill at pissing Naruto off was apparently still one of his best.

"That is it! I am sick and tired of people asking me those rhetorical questions like it's something that I've always been inherently aware of. *Did you really want to know? Didn't you always know?* Well the fuck I didn't! I had made a giant ass of myself these past few years and I am not proud of it. But I… I would not have let Sakura suffer so much if I had known. That's the bottom line," the blond said, outraged and fed up with all of it. "It's my fault. I admit that. But would people just cut me some slack and let me fix it." Sai, in response leaned further into the couch.

"Naruto had a chance at happiness and he took it. It's not in my place to be mad at him for going after something he deserves. It's certainly not in my place to be a part of it anymore and ruin it," Sai had uttered. Naruto looked at him, attempting to calm his nerves and processing what he said.

Sai looked back. "Those were her exact words when she asked me not to tell. You had a life without her now and as for her, she was going to live her remaining life to the fullest, if only for you," he added. For a long moment, the blue-eyed blond stared blankly in front of him and thought.

"But you know, Sakura can be so incredibly stupid sometimes. She got that from me, after all," Naruto mused. He had concluded that

throughout this ordeal, Sakura had only seen things her way. But Naruto was a part of it too, whether she liked it or not. It was about time he had his.

"Couldn't agree with you more."

Sakura stared blankly at the two males in front of her. It had been an exhausting day with her medical treatment. Shizune had dropped her off at her parent's house advising her to take plenty of rest. The last thing she needed to see was this. Her much needed rest was apparently going to have to wait.

Sai was nursing a nasty bruise on his left eye while Naruto - the assumed cause of it - was pouting beside him, refusing to meet Sakura's gaze.

Sakura had bared her fears and emotions to Naruto that morning and practically begged him to leave for both their sakes. By his previous reaction, she had assumed that he would acquiesce. She was honestly expecting for him to be gone when she got back, but no, instead he goes punching people.

"Do I want to know?" she sighed, frowning at the state of both her former teammates.

"He punched me."

"He deserved it."

"Uh huh."

"You did and you know it."

"Well I- " Before a full on verbal and oh so childish battle between the two, the pink-haired woman had decided to intervene.

"Oh my Kami. Could you not do that now?" she whined, rubbing her forehead with one hand while the other rested at her hip. They were worse than Haji and Neji. At least Neji had the restraint to not physically hurt her doctor. He frequently threatened the doctor with physical violence, though.

The yelling stopped as both males were now looking at her. Naruto had spoken first.

"Sai was just leaving," he stated matter-of-factly.

"Excuse me?" Sakura asked the blond. Something had changed in Naruto's expression since this morning. The uncertainty in his eyes had left and was replaced with something that reminded Sakura of the Naruto that she had always admired. If it told her anything, this was bad.

"I don't care whoever Baa-chan assigns to replace me. I'm not leaving. She can send more if she wants. I'll kick all their asses out of her before they can say 'All hail Ramen'," he replied with a huff of confidence. This was really really bad. Sakura did not doubt the promise in his statement and judging by his newfound zeal to annoy her, there was nothing she could do about it.

A mixture of pained and annoyed look reigned over Sakura's features.

"I would stay, Hag. But I don't want another black eye. It doesn't blend well with my skin color. So you're on your own," the pale man said with a smile, proceeding to the door but stopped in front of Sakura and held out a book for her. With a resigned sigh, she took said book. The cover was a picture of pencil sketches and the beginnings of a face.

"So you can improve drawing portraits. If Tsunade-sama doesn't give me another mission, I'll stop by to help you if you want." The smile on Sai's face was genuine and she realized she had missed the shinobi.

"That… would be great, Sai. Thank you," she said, trying to draw out their conversation so she wouldn't be alone with the blond who was staring intently at her. Unfortunately, Sai would leave too soon.

"Later, Dickless," was the last thing Sai said as he closed the door and left the two in silence.

"I was mad."

With that, Sakura looked at him.

"He knew. So I got mad and punched him," he simply said.

"What is that folder under the couch?"

"Never mind that. Listen…" he started, taking steps towards her. Sakura had the urge to back up but decided not to, lest it become a chase. The Naruto that was in front of her now was annoyingly persistent. When he was close enough, he stopped for a moment and looked intently at her, as if trying to read her face. This made her nervous.

"Three years ago, I thought you betrayed me," he said shakingly, rubbing his hands together. "I… wanted to get away from you because I was hurt."

"Naruto, I know that - " she tried to reply, completely taken aback at Naruto's sudden honesty. They had never talked about what happened between them. The past week's conversation with him had only been casual; both of them neither wanted to breach the subject nor dwell on it.

"Wait, let me finish first," Naruto interrupted, hoping he wasn't bossing her around too much with this. "I hated you. Well, I think I did," he said, wincing at how Sakura's expression turned to acknowledgement of hurt. "So I left you to your own devices. I didn't care that you were hurt too and I didn't care to check. You kept everything a secret from me and I was fine never bothering with it.

So in a way, we were both idiots," he said, the last statement being a fleeting thought.

"That's the conclusion you get?" Sakura said, surprised at how simple her blond companion stated their predicament.

"Yeah! How else can we put it? We were both idiots. I can't be the only one."

"Why not?"

"Because you make it so damn difficult too."

"Hey I do not!"

"Do too!"

"Do not!"

"Do too!"

"Oh my God," Sakura said frustratingly. The blond was really going to be the death of her. How he could turn a serious conversation into a childish banter was beyond her.

Fearing that he might have overstepped his bounds more than he already had, Naruto sighed and placed on a hand on the pink-haired woman.

"Gomen. The last thing I want is to stress you, but I… I'm not going anywhere okay? I spent the whole day being pissed and feeling pathetic, then brooding, then pissed again before I realized that I would not want to be anywhere but here. Deep down, I'm still your best friend Sakura. You can be mad at me as much and as long as you want, I can take it. It's okay. But I'm not leaving," he said, being serious. His eyes searched hers as he waited for her so say something. This was it. The Hokage and all gods be damned. He was not leaving.

"But what about H-"

"I'll worry about that later. The first thing we need to do is get you better. I'll take care of the rest later," he said, emphasizing the last word. He was honestly making this up as he went, but at situations like this, it was better to take one day at a time.

Sakura looked at him, contemplating the change in the blond. Or did she just forget that he was always this stubborn?

"You know what's going to happen," she said, pulling away from the warmth of Naruto's hand. The blond didn't move to follow her.

"We don't know that for sure."

"Narutoooo," she started in a tone that must have been the lovechild of a whine and a groan.

"Don't be such a pessimist, Sakura-chan. You've been such a trooper these past years. But now, I'm here which kinda makes the odds in your favor," he boasted.

"What, is that it?"

"What I mean is that we're gonna get through this. Just… just trust me." After a brief pause, he eyed her tired appearance. "Uhh, you should get some rest now," he said, grinning.

Trying not roll her eyes, she walked past Naruto and headed to her bedroom. She couldn't win tonight.

"Haji's gonna be so pissed when he finds out you stole my file," she said, closing the door and leaving Naruto in the living room.

"I borrowed it. Borrowed!" he called out with a wide grin on his face. He heard Sakura mumbling something about being an idiot in her room, which made him chuckle a bit.

He retrieved the folder under the couch and proceeded taking notes. He had honestly expected a worse conversation between them. But all it took was for him to just be Naruto for Sakura to just be Sakura. A lot of things were still needed to be said. For all he knew, both of them were still guarded around each other. But this was a good start. A good start indeed.

The shuffling around her room woke her up. Staring groggily at the ceiling, she wondered if what had happened the night before was just a nightmare, or a dream. Apparently, it was neither as Naruto went around her room picking things up and arranging books and straightening her comforter. So what, all her rules weren't followed now?

"Good morning, Sakura-chan," her name had sounded so foreign coming from him. For the past weeks, he was never able to address her like that. She wondered how that changed so easily.

"I was waiting for you to wake up. You know, 'cause you need to take two of those blue pills and then one of those white ones. So I figured I could straighten up around here," he mused, almost confident now that he memorized all Sakura's bottles, the dosage and time of intake.

Sakura narrowed her eyes at him, a silent menacing question. *Are you saying my room is messy?* He remembered Sakura being compulsive with cleaning and organizing and swallowed slowly.

"But you know, nothing much to clean here, anyway," he lied with a nervous chuckle.

Sakura moved her legs from the bed so she was sitting on the side. "No, you're right. I was just tired last night," she explained.

"No no! It's fine. I can clean up in here, you know. I'm here to help," he said, smiling as he approached her. He momentarily froze as he saw the beginning of a nosebleed on Sakura. Her file said that it was

normal for her to get frequent nosebleeds. Not wanting for Sakura to see his panic, he quickly found the tissue box, took two, three plies and before he was aware of it, he was kneeling on the bed, wiping the blood off her face. There was no panic in his face, only a hint of worry and care.

If Sakura's wide eyes were any indication, she was surprised with his actions too. Taking the tissues off his hand, she mumbled thanks and immediately turned her face from him, dabbing the remaining blood from her nose.

"Uhh," the blond started. He wasn't sure whether to apologize or not.

"I'll be out in a bit. I can take my pills then," Sakura beat him to it.

Nodding, Naruto walked towards the door, and then remembering the reason why he came in the room in the first place, turned around.

"Sakura-chan, I was hoping I could take you somewhere," he said. Sakura looked at him confused, signaling him to be more specific than that.

"Well, I checked with Baa-chan earlier and she approved. Said she'd take care of Haji should he *dis* approve," he stated further, chuckling at the thought of a raging Haji. "I'm gonna take you to Mt. Myobokuzan," the blond added.

"What?" asked Sakura quietly, still confused at his words.

"Well, the toad summons have great medicine. And Mama frog is a great medic. It won't hurt if we checked there. And since currently, I'm the only one that has access to it, I figured I can bring you, you know?"

For about a minute, Sakura did not speak.

"So let me get this straight. You're gonna bring me to where your frog summons are to find out if they can heal me? Frogs, Naruto. We're

talking frogs here, am I right?" Sakura said disbelievingly. God, this was making her head spin.

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Naruto, are you cr-"

"So it's a go then, Sakura-chan? Great, we'll leave in thirty," Naruto interrupted, already walking, no, running, out of her room.

"Uzumaki Naruto, you come back here!" she yelled. "Wha?" It was too late to protest.

As she slumped in her bed once again, already maxed out for the day, she wondered if the time she spent with Naruto would cut her life even shorter than it already was.

Yes, it probably would.

Please leave your valued reviews. Thanks. Til next time!

Downpour

Disclaimer: Don't own Naruto. Don't own anything.

I'm back, baby. How's everyone doing? :)

I'm basically sorry, again. And I hope you'll forgive me, again. Thanks for all whose been messaging and urging me to continue with this story. This is dedicated to all of my loyal readers. Enjoy!

Chapter 17: Downpour

I'll keep you warm, dancing in a downpour

And I'll hold your body slowly turning

I'll keep you warm, dancing in a downpour

And breathe it in and take it off and soak our skin

- Rainy Zurich

She had her eyes closed, refusing to open it until the rush stopped. All she could hear were swirling sounds as they echoed wherever space she was in right now. Although she had been a kunoichi for a while, she had never been reverse-summoned to the land of toads, or of any summon for that matter. Even now that there really was no turning back, there was nagging feeling in her mind that told her that she should've just locked herself in her room and ignore her body guard's ridiculous request to take her god-knows-where for a medical consult. It would have worked. She was sure Naruto wouldn't dare dragging her sick self without her consent, she was just not that used to arguing with him. Was he always that stubborn? Probably.

In retrospect, she realized that maybe she had not put up enough of a fight to keep away from him. Maybe she had not given him enough reason to persuade him that they were going down a slippery slope. Naruto staying with her was not going to solve anything, it was not going to heal her, and he was never going to be the deus ex machina to her story. No, her story was at the least, a lame tragedy with no heroes and no villains. Whatever the matter was, she knows that. And Naruto would have realized it by now, if he weren't being, well, Naruto.

It seemed like he had thought of everything. He actually spent ten minutes explaining to her how in the hell she was ever allowed to travel to Myobokuzan. But all his words to her were just a blur of sounds and him gesturing some weird signs and holding up a vial of what she assumed was her blood. It was uncharacteristic of her to not pay attention to something like that, but she had spent the entire time trying not to roll her eyes and thinking up of excuses not to go. She even thought of faking another episode, something that would be really easy. But all that would do was get her into a lot of trouble, and Haji would yell at her. Oh, how she hates it when he yells.

That left her with no choice but to be in for the ride and hoped to be done as soon as possible. If toads would make Naruto get off her back for even just a day, then she might as well swallow that pill, although she hoped she wouldn't be asked to ingest anything there. Toads might be intelligent and advanced summons, but they were still toads.

She half expected the "travel" to be done in a split second but instead, it felt like a long minute. She could feel an unusual warmth surrounding her which was probably Naruto. In order for the reverse-summon to work, they had to be close to each other. The blond had actually fidgeted for quite a few minutes before he started his technique. She had been amused and also wondered if he had really though things through. There was no need to dwell on that now. If the lessening of noise was any indication, it meant they finally arrived at their destination.

"We're here," the blond whispered to her. She felt him briefly let go while she opened her eyes to the first time. What greeted her sight was a lush landscape of green and a multitude more of colors. The grass felt soft but firm beneath her feet while the trees adorning the surroundings were bigger than she had ever seen. Konoha's Forest of Death had humongous trees, but those in Myobokuzan were even immensely larger. She had to wonder what creatures could be living in those trees.

He had to smile at her expression of bewilderment. Myobokuzan was a beautiful place, serene and quiet, bustling with harmonious sounds of the waterfall all around. He had always wanted to show the mountains to Sakura when he was still in training, but never had the chance. Actually, he thought long and hard last night about whether to push through with this plan. Maybe he was hopeful, or crazy, or both. More than battle summons, the toads were also medical creatures. He had seen Shima heal the toads after battle. That they can treat and heal sickness to humans was unheard of. But it was worth a shot. If anything good would come out of this trip, at least Sakura had a change of scenery.

"Neat, ne?" he said, smiling at her. She barely nodded, trying to take in her surroundings.

"There you kids are!" chided the high-pitched voice of Shima, hopping towards the clearings.

"Shima-san!," acknowledged Naruto. Said toad who to Sakura, seemed like wearing curlers underneath her purple head, settled herself on Naruto

"You must be Sakura-chan. I've been expecting you, dear," said the purple toad.

"Um, hi. Nice to meet you," the pink-haired girl replied, bowing slightly towards the toad. It was her first time talking to Naruto's summons. Shima seemed pleasant and motherly. Sakura smiled at that.

"Naruto said you were really pretty. Guess there was a reason why he talked about you all the time. Good job kid," squeaked Shima, hopping slightly on the blond's shoulder to tease him.

"Hey!" protested Naruto. "That was a long time… I mean that's not… We talked about this Baa-chan," he stuttered, not knowing whether to apologize to Sakura or dig a hole where he could crawl in. It had been a long time since he was at Myobokuzan. Back then, he had actually talked to Shima about Sakura. Apparently, his brief rundown to Shima of what happened the past years had not sink in yet. He looked at Sakura with a half-smile and apology.

"Thank you. Um, I guess," Sakura replied. Thank Kami that Sakura was better at this than Naruto was.

Shima led them to her and Fukushima's hut, familiarizing Sakura with the mountain. Said girl had been surprised that the hut could accommodate bigger creatures like humans. "My husband and I are small, but sometimes we have very big visitors," the Mother toad explained. She turned to Naruto then. "Last week, Bunta was here. Broke my couch, that big lump! He's not allowed in here until he replaces that, I tell ya." Naruto laughed at this. Knowing Bunta and his fear of Shima (because, well, she's like a really scary mother), that big toad would not be found anywhere near the vicinity for the next few weeks.

Sakura settled comfortably in the kitchen chair and watched as Shima told Naruto stories of what's been going on in the mountains. Naruto seemed very comfortable around this place, like it was his home. It's been a long time since she had seen him that carefree around such surroundings. After a few minutes, the Mother toad nestled herself in the table in front of Sakura, almost at eye level of the girl. Naruto took a seat beside her.

"So, Sakura-chan. How are you feeling?" the toad asked, pulling out a scroll from beneath her robe.

"I'm okay," replied the girl as the Shima nodded her head, her eyes on the scroll.

"Uh-huh. Naruto-chan here sent me your file last night. I've never heard of anything like this. But if you don't mind I'd like to take a look," she informed, her squeak echoing around the room. Aside from Naruto's information, Shima had actually heard of the pink-haired girl's unusual case. "Don't worry. I'm a medic," Shima added with a chuckle.

Seeing Sakura roaming her eyes around the room, probably looking for any medical equipment in the house, the Mother Toad snapped her fingers to get the girl's attention. "I've get everything I need right here," she said, gesturing to herself. "Myobokuzan's senjutsu allows me to feel your vitals - heartbeat, pulse, circulation. I don't need any of that stuff humans use. The closer you are to me, the better I read your body."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I just that, this is new for me, that's all. I'm sorry," Sakura said, repeating her apologies. The last thing she wanted was for the Mother toad to think of her as suspicious or untrusting of her abilities.

"That's okay, sweetie. It's Naruto's fault, anyway," Shima replied with a smile, waving her webbed feet towards the blond beside Sakura. The pink-haired girl chuckled slightly at that, hearing Naruto grumbling beside her, something about "not having time and women being mean".

"Well. It's quite warm in here, so is it okay if you take your sweater off. I want to see you arms," requested the Mother toad. It was long silence before Sakura responded to that request, pulling her sleeves longer to cover her hands.

Shima gave Naruto knowing glance, to which the blond nodded slightly with acknowledgement. The smile he had been sporting for the past minutes faded into a thin line. He already saw what was underneath that cover and Sakura was very private about it.

"Sakura-chan," he said, softly putting his hand on her shoulder. "It's okay. She won't bite," he teased. Sakura didn't look at him for a reply, and instead looked down and held on tighter to the sleeves. This was harder than he thought. "It's okay," he repeated, this time sincerely asking her. "Please."

"Get out, Naruto-chan," interrupted Shima.

"What?" said blond replied, confused with the sudden order.

"Have you lost your ability to hear? I said get out. Get lost. Find Bunta and help him rebuild my couch, for all I care. I need to be alone with Sakura-chan," Shima said with a stern expression. "Don't argue with me, dear. Or so help me I will make you eat the whole tub of my homemade curry," she threatened.

Naruto stood up, still ready to argue when Shima looked at him with a pleading gaze, wanting him to understand why he had to leave. He looked at Sakura who stayed silent. With a slight of his feet, he made to leave. "Fine. I'll be at the living room if you need me." Before he was completely out of the kitchen, he heard Sakura's soft voice, saying thank you.

Naruto slumped in the living room with heavy and bitter grumble. He sat with his legs folded on the messy floor. "Mean old Mother toad. Stupid living room with no couch," he complained. He hated having to leave. He had just promised himself that he was not going to be left out when it comes to Sakura's condition, but here he was again being the opposite. Shima had kicked him out not because she didn't want him to be there. It was Sakura. He knew it was her. She still wasn't comfortable with him. Just when he thought they were making progress.

"You poor sweatheart," he heard Shima's faint voice.

"It actually looks worse than it is. Really," came Sakura's hushed reply. Naruto snorted. There she goes again, downplaying any

remote evidence of her sickness that others can see. He smacked his head and tried to keep his calm cool for the next three to four hours. It was a good thing it was easy to meditate in the mountain, but that didn't help him much when someone was being stubborn like a certain pink-haired girl.

Just when he thought he couldn't wait any longer and was ready to barge in uninvited, Sakura emerged with the Mother toad around mid-afternoon. "Hey Naruto-chan," called Shima. Naruto resisted the urge to stick out his tongue to said toad.

"I need some time to figure out how to formulate a treatment for Sakura-chan. In the mean time, why don't you show Sakura around the mountain? I'm sure she'd love to see the waterfalls," suggested Shima, as if she hadn't just kicked Naruto out of her kitchen and wasn't feeling said blond's malicious intent directed towards her.

"Go on. Get going, sweetheart. You can have dinner when you come back."

"Ugh. Fine." He forgot how bossy the Mother toad was. She was much bossier than her husband Fukasaku, and that's something.

"Sorry about that," Sakura said when they were out of the house. Naruto walked ahead of her while she tried to keep up. He wasn't waiting for her this time.

"Yeah," was all he said. For some reason, Sakura felt guilty. But he needed to understand. They walked in silence until they reached a path of overgrown leaves on stalks. Sakura briefly forgot her thoughts as she stepped along the landscape of lush colors. She almost stumbled in her walk, keeping her head up to gaze into the shade of the leaves. It truly was unbelievable.

Seeing Sakura like this reminded him of the old Sakura, his bestfriend who was easily moved by the beauty around her. She had always believed in the beauty in all things, even in him. He missed it,

her. How he ever got along without missing her was beyond his understanding.

"This is it," he said, calling out to Sakura when he reached the waterfalls.

"Wow," Sakura exclaimed as they settled on a nearby bank.

"I went here all the time during training, to swim or just think," he said as he watched Sakura carefully take off her shoes to dip her feet on the water and taking a seat at the shallow side.

"It's so beautiful and quiet," she said, more talking to herself than to him. "Did you ever come back here? After your training?" she asked, looking at his direction.

He smiled, sitting next to her and dipping his feet in the water as well. He was thankful that the water hadn't been too cold for Sakura. "No. I haven't been here in a while. There was never any time lately." Of course, he was busy being an ANBU Captain, dealing with Hyuugas, preparing for a wedding that never took place.

Naruto should be here more often, Sakura thought. Kami knows he needs to it. He was going to need it. They sat there somewhat comfortably for a few moments before Naruto took a deep breath and spoke.

"Hey Sakura-chan," he said in a soft voice. Sakura looked at him, head tilted, still amused by the little fish that were swirling around her submerged feet. . "Yeah?"

"Next time. I don't need to leave the room," he said, looking into her green eyes - those eyes which reminded him of how much hurt he had put her through.

"What?" she asked, confused by his statement.

"I told you over and over that I can handle it. I don't want you feeling uncomfortable when I'm around. When you go to medical consults, when you're in pain, I…"

"Don't start," she hushed, taking her feet off the water with a mild but sudden splash. This prompted Naruto to do the same and walk after her.

"Wait, Sakura. Don't walk away," he pleaded. It was the logical thing to do to just let it go. Let Sakura do whatever the hell she wants, because it would be better. But Naruto didn't like better if it meant that she would hide her pain for him. And damn it, he would give anything in the world for her just to understand that.

"Then don't start," she said, turning around and stopping Naruto in his tracks. It was a nice and comfortable day. Why did he have to ruin it so fast? The blond took another deep breath, his expression turning to acknowledgment.

"You're mad." It was not a question, but a firm fact coming from him.

"I'm not," she defended, trying to keep her emotions in check.

"You should be."

"Well, I'm not." She started walking away again when she felt a hand firmly gripping her arm. It wasn't enough to hurt, but enough to keep her where she was.

"You should be. You know what I realized? We are never going to get anywhere until you get mad at me, or beat me up for everything that I ever did to you. I know what you went through."

"No, you don't. Let go," she said, her voice already trembling from his rattling words.

"Yeah, maybe I don't. What I know of how I've hurt is not even close to the real thing. That's why you need to acknowledge that you're

mad at me. So I can properly apologize. And you can think of how you can ever forgive me in this lifetime." He didn't recognize his own voice when he said those words. "Otherwise, Sakura-chan, we are never move on from this, this limbo we're in where we can't stand to tell each other anything." He felt her tugging her arm furiously from his hold.

"You think it's that simple?" Another hard tug and he let go of her. No. She was not going to let him break her. She was ready to run, when his next words froze her to the spot.

"Everything was bullshit."

"What?"

"You heard me. It's bullshit. Why did you save me?"

"You're crazy."

"Why can't you answer me, huh? If you were being honest that night, then why didn't you tell me how mad you are at me. You should be furious. This! This facade you've been feeding me this past few days, it's not the real you. It's all bullshit." He could see the anger coming now. She was walking alright, but now away from him, but toward him, ready to slap him.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" She yelled, using both her hands to push him away. His words hurt, more than it had ever hurt before.

"Be mad. Come on," he egged on, letting her push him repeatedly.

"Shut up."

"Be mad."

"SHUT UP!"

"Be mad. Be honest for one second, Sakura." That did it. One moment she was angrily pounding her hands on his chest pushing him away, the next, she was slapping him. Hard.

"You jerk! You insensitive selfish jerk!" she accused, tears streaming down her face. "Yes, YES! I was mad. I was mad because I was your best friend. You were supposed to trust me. I was your best friend and you were supposed to trust me. How could you ever think that I would betray you especially during war? How could you?" She yelled with another shove.

"I was mad at you for every single day that you believed that I chose Sasuke. I was mad at you for every promise that you thought I broke! I was mad! But you know what? Being mad made me so tired. I was so tired because I knew you were never coming back to me. I was tired, and sick and so sad!" She paused, letting her words sink it. "And in the end, I just missed my best friend. My best friend who got all the things that he ever wished for just because I was out of the picture. So yes, I was mad. But how could I stay mad when you were already so happy without me?" She had never cried so hard like that. Naruto could only watch as she walked away, clutching her chest with what he could only think as the unbearable pain he had caused her.

Something wet reached his cheeks. Another one. And then another one. He looked up to see the greying sky loom overhead as he realized what would happen next. He couldn't believe that Shima- didn't remind him of the rains. The summer seasons were great in Myobokuzan, but once or twice heavy rain comes. These raging storms go on for hours and no one's allowed to go outside when these come. He was an idiot for forgetting such important detail.

"Damn it!" he cursed, already running to catch up to Sakura. She would definitely get sick under these conditions. Whether that first drop on his cheek was from the rain or from his burning eyes, he will never know.

She ran furiously not knowing where to go or how to get there. Naruto had been a jerk. Why was he such a jerk? All she ever wanted was to die in peace. He didn't have the right to take this away from her. She could hear him screaming for her not far behind but she didn't stop. She would never stop for him.

Her tears had blurred her vision that she didn't notice the big drops of water around her creating a muddy ground for her to tread. Naruto was still screaming for her. It was sensory overload that it was too late when she realized that she was slipping.

"Damn it. Damn it. Damn it," she heard him say. She wasn't aware of how it happened, but right now, Naruto was holding her in his arms, gently putting her down to the ground while thunder and heavy winds could be heard outside. They were in a cave. Why was there a thundering storm during summer season in the mountains? Sakura was already shivering with the cold.

"Here, take this," he said, unzipping his jacket and walking towards her to wrap it around her. He was surprised when she took a step back away from him. He tried again and this time was barely getting the jacket around her shoulder when she pushed away from him.

"You're shivering," he pointed out, reaching for her hands to warm them with his.

"Don't touch me," she said, backing away.

"Sakura-chan…"

"I said don't touch me." He could see her hurt expression as she struggled to remove herself from him. She repeatedly told him to not touch her like a broken record while he repeatedly refused.

He didn't do as she asked. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her shoulder, tightening the other around her back so she would stop

fighting. "Don't… Don't… Let me go!" she finally said when she started sobbing again.

"You're horrible. You horrible horrible jerk," she further accused. He held her impossibly tighter as the heavy storm drowned her sobs. He was refusing to let her go.

"I know. I'm sorry, Sakura-chan," was all he said. In between sobs, she screamed at him for leaving her and breaking her beyond repair. All he could do was acknowledge them and apologize. It was an impossible situation. And he had been the one to hurt her in order to get her to admit the truth. So he did the only thing he could. He voiced his apologies over and over. And he meant every single one.

"You'd think they'd be home by now," Fukasaku said while downing his breakfast. It had been a rough night with the raging summer storm coming in. When arrived home, Naruto and Sakura had already left.

"You think they're okay, Tou-chan?" asked his wife, stopping to look up from reading her medical scroll.

"That storm was unexpected. But Naruto-chan's resourceful. I'm sure he figured something out," he said, assuring his wife.

"You're right," the Mother toad finished with a sigh. "Tou-chan…"

"Yeah?"

"There's something about Sakura-chan…"

"What about her? Did you find something?"

"Well, I'm not really sure but…"

"Hello? We're here…" interrupted Naruto's voice as he and Sakura came through the door. They looked like they could use a few more

hours of sleep, but other that, they looked fine. They were after all, shinobi, or at least one of them is.

"Hey, Naruto-chan! You're still alive," teased the white mohawked toad. "Are you both okay?"

"Yes. We're good. I had emergency summon scrolls for food and warmth. So we're good," Naruto assured.

"How about you, dear? Are you okay?" asked Shima, hopping on to the table near the pink-haired girl.

"Yes, I am. He took care of everything," replied Sakura with a hoarse voice.

"That's great then! I'm sorry you came to visit when the rains came. It's not a very lovely experience, you see," apologized Fukasaku while his wife fumbled around the nearest cabinet.

"Anyway, it's actually good that you're still here. I'm still trying to make sense of your condition, Sakura-chan. But I have concocted something that will help you with your arm," announced the purple toad, handing Sakura a medium vial with clear liquid.

"What is that?" inquired the blond.

"That, Naruto-chan, will help the veins in her arms to return to normal. It's made from the oil here. Try it," suggested Shima.

Naruto had already taken the vial from her hand when Sakura realized it. "Can I, Sakura-chan?" the blond asked with a small smile. The steady silence that filled the room made the husband and wife toad fidget in discomfort.

"I think he can!" chimed Fukasaku with a nervous chuckle. "Sakura-chan, why don't you take a seat and let Naruto do it, ne?" That had brought the two humans back to Earth.

"Please?" the blond said.

"'Kay," she gave in while taking a seat in the kitchen. She started pulling up the sleeve of her sweater to reveal the grey bulging veins. Sakura expected Naruto to cringe or look away at the almost hideous sight of her arms. Instead, his finger lightly traced the veins.

"Tell me if it hurts, okay?" She nodded in agreement. Naruto was very careful in applying the liquid to her arms. His fingers gently spread the liquid while his other hand kept a steady touch above her pulse. Sakura kept her gaze on the blond, remembering all that happened last night. It was a brutal, painful, and agonizing night for the both of them, and yet Naruto had never seemed more at peace with her and himself than he was now. He cried as well and profusely apologized until he was so exhausted.

"Look at that," the blond exclaimed, interrupting Sakura from her thoughts. She finally looked down at her arms to see the grey veins slowly return to their normal size. "That's amazing," Naruto added, gently smoothing his hands on her arms.

"It works so fast because you're here the mountain. You can use it back home, but the effect will take time," explained Shima.

"Thank you, Shima-san," Sakura said with a smile. Naruto nodded in agreement with her, wanting to say the same thing.

"Sure thing, sweetheart. I'll let Naruto-chan know if I have any news," the Mother toad assured.

Shima had insisted that the two take their breakfast before they leave, but Naruto, in a horrified gesture, stuttered his disinclination to the offer. He wasn't that hungry, he lamely reasoned. Sakura had been more gracious with her refusal, citing dietary restrictions, amused by the blond's expression. They had to get going so Sakura can rest, Naruto added.

"Something's changed with the two, Naruto-chan," Shima commented to the blond as the two were heading out.

"I hope so." he said as he waved goodbye.

It was not his thing to fidget, nor was it his thing to toss around when trying to sleep. But for the love of Kami, he was doing both.

"Would you stop that? You're worse than Naruto," the raven-haired man seated near the fire commented.

Hyuuga Neji had to snort at the Uchiha's statement. This was his worst mission yet. The life of someone very important to him was on the line and he's stuck with the worst jackass in the world on a mission which the shinobi world calls a lost cause. Yes, it pretty much sucked.

"If you're not going to sleep, then take watch and let Kakashi sleep," Sasuke said as he polished his katana.

"For a self-centered ass, you really talk a lot don't you?" Neji replied, not being able to resist the urge to reply.

"I talk when I know someone can potentially be a burden to the mission." Not soon after Sasuke finished his sentence that Neji had his hands around the raven-haired man's neck.

This time, Kakashi had to step in. "Stop acting like ten year-olds!" the masked man yelled as he pulled Neji off Sasuke. "You've been doing this ever since we started this mission. Would you just let up already?" Kakashi said in frustration.

"You shouldn't even let this traitor be on this mission," Neji mocked.

"You shouldn't even let *this* traitorbe on this mission," Sasuke echoed.

"You son of a -"

"You stop right there, Neji!" interrupted Kakashi who had activated his sharingan. These two weren't even trying to get along, for Kami's sake. "I'm going to say this once. We are on this mission to save Sakura, okay? That's something both of you can actually agree on. So if we're ever going to do that, you have to try really hard not to kill each other. I hope I am clear about this or so help me I will have both your heads." And that was that. Neji returned to his makeshift bed while Sasuke was sent out to check the perimeter.

It had been a tense couple of days. Maybe because they were already so close.

You didn't think things would be easy, did ya? Yes, I' m evil. And snippets of moments are my thing these days. Anyway, hope you liked this update. I finished this with three hours of sleep in me, so please forgive any mistakes. I promise to post the next chapter in a month (at the latest). Thank you for your patience! And please review. Your comments are highly appreciated.

Ja ne!

Break

Disclaimer: Yeah, I don't own Naruto. Sue me. I have no money.

I'm actually scared to post this so late. Really, I'm cowering on the far side of the room right now. Please please don't be mad at me. I wrote the first part of the chapter weeks ago, but couldn't find my muse to finish it. So sorry.

But the good news is, I've already started on the next chapter. So yay! Reviews encourage me to write, so do drop me a line. Anyway, enjoy!

Chapter 18: Break

Take a breath

Hold my hand

And now you're not alone

- Munich

"You look bored," she said while trying to get comfortable in her seat. She was actually lying. He didn't look bored. He was watching her like a hawk as if expecting her to have a seizure any time soon. It was the last thing she needed or insisted upon, but she never got to win any arguments these days. She wondered why she even bothered.

"I'm not," he immediately replied, his blue eyes trailing to the transparent tube connected to her arm, sucking out her blood, cleaning it, and apparently supplying it back.

"Fine, you're not bored. But you look really weird. It's creeping me out," she pointed out. This time, she was telling the truth. Naruto's bright blue eyes were narrowed and directed at her state.

They were at the hospital for her daily "blood thingy". Those were her exact words when Sakura described what they were going there for, obviously sugar coating her procedures. She was seated in this big soft chair - much like those lazy couches house bums use - while her blood was cleaned by a device connected to her veins. There were a couple of patients having their dialysis in the same room. She lay on her back while he took another seat next to her, observing her for what seemed to her was an eternity by now.

He would have to use that special oil the toads gave to her, he thought. At the rate those needles were inserted into her, she was bound to collect big bruises on her arms after this. He worried for her, now more than ever, when she was increasingly getting tired and had dark circles under her eyes - an awful contrast to her current pale complexion. He probably did look weird with him watching her intently.

"Sorry," he lamely replied, attempting not to invade her personal bubble too much. "Does your arm hurt? Do you need anything?" he offered.

She wanted to be alone, but knew he wouldn't acquiesce. "I'm good. I'm used to this," she said with a small smile, her green eyes trailing to her arms. She wished that she could cover it, so Naruto wouldn't look so worried. She's been through the procedure a couple of times in the past, and compared to the more experimental and painful ones Haji had done on her, this was nothing.

"Why don't you stretch your legs outside? This will take a while," the pink-haired patient suggested.

There she goes again, he thought. After that fight in Myobokuzan, her insistence that he leave her side had subsided, but that didn't mean that it went away completely.

"Nope," he said, stretching his legs on his soft seat and lay back himself, tearing his eyes from her. "I'm comfortable here," he wheezed. He turned his head to look at Sakura once more while silence filled the room.

"I give up," she sighed, defeated, and then closed her eyes to relax. There was a dull pain in her arms. But then again, there was a dull pain everywhere in her body.

"Hey Sakura-chan, tell me a story," his voice said, disrupting her attempt to relax. Trust Naruto to be not be able to shut up for even just a few minutes.

"What?"

"Tell me a story," Naruto repeated, his cerulean eyes boring into her green ones, intense and inquisitive. "From when we didn't see each other. I want to know stories," he added, as if those times weren't a sensitive topic for both of them.

When she didn't answer right away, he continued. "Come on, I'm bored!" he whined.

"You just said you weren't!" she accused, lifting her head up to look pointedly at him.

"I am now!" he defended. For a high-ranking shinobi who has survived all of the life-threatening missions ever thrown at him, he was such a nine-year old.

"I…" she started answering after a few minutes, thinking. "I don't know any. There's nothing to tell," she finally said, not wanting to share their times apart. It was half-true, really. Sometimes she felt sad, but most times, she felt empty. That was it. She heard him shuffle a couple of times after that.

"Fine, I'll tell one," he said. "On my first time as an Anbu captain…" This surprised her, as she expected him to feel uncomfortable and

finally shut up about it.

"Should you even tell this story?" she stated, knowing that shinobi missions, especially Anbu ones, were supposed to be top secret.

"Of course!" he answered, his tone a bit upset on her interruption. "Anyway, there was this S-class mission, with me and Kiba. Stupidest mission ever. I thought this was gonna be an infiltration, you know? Or a recon at least. But instead, it was an escort mission for some foreign dignitary's daughter. Chunins could have handled it, heck, Konoha genins could, but noooo, they needed a newly-promoted Anbu captain." By then, Naruto was already blabbering. He was always one to whine about mundane missions. Sakura was tempted to tune out the rest of his story.

"The girl was our age. Really pretty. I mean really really pretty. And Kiba kept on hitting on her. And during the whole damn trip! Man, you would think that after the first twenty rejections, he would take the hint. But noooo! He just kept bothering her. Even I, the captain, couldn't do anything about it. It was annoying as hell."

"Gee, if I know, you were with Kiba hitting on her the whole time," she commented off -handedly.

"Hey! No, I wasn't!" he argued, seemingly shocked by the presumption.

"Please, if she was as pretty as you described her to be, then there'd be two of you getting rejected. When we escorted the Princess of Snow back then, you set the all time record of being rejected for two days!" she teased, remembering how lovestruck Naruto was for the woman. As a twelve year old, Naruto had a reputation for openly gawking at obviously beautiful women.

"I was not! Really!" he said, contemplating his story. "And it's not like I could. At that time, I was already…" he started, ready to defend himself when he stopped, suddenly realizing that his next argument

was about to strike at a nerve. Silence followed suit as Sakura realized it as well.

"Dating," she said, finishing his sentence.

Sakura closed her eyes, breathing out, wishing that he'd take the hint and stop talking already. During that three years, it had never bothered Sakura - knowing that he was with another woman. She genuinely wished for him to be happy and contented. For all she knew, he really was. But she didn't know why she didn't want to talk about it.

Well, that's story's over, Naruto thought, kicking himself for being an idiot again. He found himself wanting to apologize profusely to her and wondered why. They hadn't been together when they had that falling apart. But something in him told him that it was a form of betrayal on his part.

"Sakura-chan…" he started.

"It's okay," she interrupted. "We're fine." She smiled warmly at him, but it bothered him for some reason. The wheezing sound of the machine filled the room, while Sakura shifted her body's angle away from the blond. Why was it so damn hard to do this?

"Are they fighting?" a voice suddenly echoed too loudly in the room, breaking the silence. Both Sakura and Naruto turned to look for the source.

"You idiot husband! She said they were fine, didn't she?"

"But saying fine in women's language means run for your life bastard, you're screwed!" The bickering continued until Naruto decided to cough too loudly, extending his head across the room to get the couple's attention.

An old man, probably in his seventies, skin almost as pale as Sakura's, was seated a seat away to the left of Sakura, with a tube in

his vein and a breathing device on his nose. Beside him was a woman about the man's age, holding his wrinkled hand. She looked tiny and frail with thin gray hair, but had a warm smile on her face. Both looked at Naruto and Sakura's direction, obviously realizing that they were talking too loud.

"Oh! I'm sorry dear," the old woman said. "It's just that there's no TV in here," she explained, though she seemed amused that their obvious eavesdropping on the blond and the pink-haired's conversation had been found out by the subjects themselves.

"And you're more entertaining than those cable dramas," the old man added in an amused voice as well.

"Shut up, Ichi!" the woman reprimanded, squeezing his hand in a warning.

"Ow! Damn it, woman! You're hurting me," he whined, but didn't let go of her hand. The woman didn't reply to him and turned to the Sakura and Naruto.

"Sorry about that," she repeated. "I'm Miho. This is my husband, Ichi," she greeted.

It was Sakura who remembered her manners first. "I'm Sakura, this is Naruto," gesturing to the blond, returning the woman's smile.

"Pleased to meet you," Naruto said soon after. "I guess," he added under his breath, a little offended that the couple were shamelessly listening in on them.

"Hey," Sakura nudged, reprimanding his added words.

"What?" Naruto said, looking at Sakura, as if telling her *Why should I be polite? They're rude, old people!*

Sakura rolled her eyes. Baby.

Ichi and Miho were amused at the young people's antics.

"You know, kids, when you're as old as us, you don't worry about being rude," the old man pointed out, snickering, as if he was reading the blond's mind.

"Please pay him no mind. The drugs are getting to him," Miho said, attempting to placate the two. "So what are you in for? Ichi has liver cancer. Stage four. How about you, dear?" she asked.

"Um, cancer too," Sakura replied, not wanting to give more information. She did have cancer. Sort of.

"Aren't you too young to be getting cancer? How old are you, eight?" Ichi interjected. Sakura giggled, amused at the old man's sarcasm.

"No, I'm twenty two," she explained, smiling. Miho smiled sadly, her features seemingly affected by the young girl's state.

"Tough luck, huh?" Ichi replied, serious this time. The pink-haired nodded her head in agreement. "At least you have this pretty boy here for company. Not a lot of good looking people come here often."

An offended gasp came from Miho, loud enough to get the rest's attention. "Except for you, of course, sweetheart," Ichi added lovingly. One would think he was just lying, but Naruto knew there was truth in there. Miho rolled her eyes at her husband's antics, obviously used to them.

"Do you stay here in the hospital?" Sakura asked.

"No, dear. Ichi keeps hitting on the nurses here," the woman joked. "We stay at the old folks' home near here," she explained. "How about you? Are you admitted here?"

"No. I'm an out patient, actually," the pink-haired replied. "Haji Yuy's my doctor."

"That man? He seems like an ass," Ichi commented.

"Hah! You got that right," Naruto said, finding himself agreeing to the rude old man for the first time.

"He's not. He can just be a little… difficult," Sakura said to both Haji's detractors, defending the handsome doctor.

"Yeah, and I only like ramen a little," he retorted, challenging her.

"Oh, don't get me started on that," she said with gritting her teeth. Before a full on argument ensued, Ichi and Miho's laughter echoed in treatment room. They had almost forgotten about the couple.

"Bickering like an old couple already," Ichi pointed out while his wife nodded in agreement. This earned him a silent reply from the sick girl and her blond companion.

Miho suddenly let out an excited gasp, as if alerting the people in the room of what she was about to say. "I have a wonderful idea! Sakura-chan, you look like you could use some time outside. You should come to our monthly tea party at the old folks' home next Thursday! It'll be a change of scenery from this hospital. There'll be tea, dancing and a lot of soft food," she suggested excitedly. "Bring Naruto too. A lot of widows are going to want to dance with him," she teased.

Surprised, more like ambushed, by the sudden invitation, Sakura found herself accepting the invitation for both of them.

Who couldn't say no to an afternoon of hanging out with active seniors and soft food?

"Sorry about that," Sakura finally said while Naruto wheeled her out of the treatment room, waving goodbye to their newfound old couple friends. "I said yes without consulting you and probably committing you as a date for every old woman there," she added, tilting her head upwards to look at the blond.

"That's okay," Naruto replied. "Soft food seems fun," he commented, looking down at her with a bright smile. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," she nodded, returning her smile. She was relieved that Naruto seemed genuinely excited.

"Can we go home now?" he asked after he helped her carefully put on her scarf and sweater. Naruto was slowly getting used to the fact that Sakura-chan wears a winter outfit despite the summer weather.

"Not yet," came the baritone voice of Haji. "We have to take a sample of her spinal fluid first," he said, settling himself in front of Sakura's wheelchair and readjusting her scarf - the one previously adjusted by the blond.

"What's that?" Naruto asked, to which Haji didn't bother to answer.

"Do we have to?" Sakura whined. It was her least favorite procedure. It hurt like hell and she finds herself unable to walk after.

"You know we do," Haji replied, already taking over the handles of the wheelchair from Naruto's hands and wheeling her away.

Naruto slowly counted to five while following Haji and Sakura. He had to remind himself that the hospital was no place for beating someone halfway to death. Much as he wanted not to be bothered by it, Haji's constant pretending that he was not there irritated him to no end.

Several moments more and they were in front of another treatment room with nurses already prepping Sakura. As Naruto was about to put on a lab gown - a standard protocol for those who entered the room, a firm hand in front of his face informed him to stop.

"You're not coming with her," Haji warned.

"I'm surprised you even see me, kind doctor," the irritated blond wheezed. If only he wasn't worried that he could damage Haji's

brains by punching his face, he would've done it by now. Their small disagreement caught the attention of the pink-haired patient.

"I can have security kick you out," the long-haired doctor cautioned .

"And *I* can kick your ass right here right now," Naruto said in a dangerous tone.

"Please stop fighting," interrupted Sakura's voice before anyone got hurt."You can't make him leave," she said, turning to her doctor. "Believe me. I've tried several times." Naruto affirmed it to the doctor and the nurses in the room by nodding vigorously.

"Fine. But I'll sedate you if and when you misbehave," he warned.

Naruto took a seat beside the patient's bed putting him directly facing Sakura who lay sideways. Haji was on the other side opening the backside of his patient's robe.

"You hate this, huh?" he said to the girl, attempting to distract her of the impending pain. He thanked the Gods that Sakura couldn't see the big needles that lay on the table beside Haji. It was the first time that Sakura looked scared. Even he was scared of that kind of thing being inserted to his spine. But he couldn't be scared in front of her. He was the one willing to fight tooth and nail to be in that room.

"Yeah," she affirmed with in a low voice, already gripping the bedsheets.

"Hey Sakura-chan. You can hold my hand, 'kay? They're right here," he offered, placing his hands beside hers. The pink-haired didn't reply and continued to grip the sheets.

"Sakura, you're gonna feel a little pressure, okay? I'm gonna be really careful. If it hurts too much, I'll try to stop," Haji said from his masked face.

"Okay," Sakura said, nodding her head once.

Her piercing cries were enough to break Naruto's posture to oblivion. He wracked his brain searching for something that can calm her, make her feel better while her bones were being invaded. The most painful he got from a medical procedure was when blood samples were drawn from him. This was a million times more painful.

"Get out if you can't handle it," the gritted voice of Haji came above Sakura's cries. The statement was directed to the blond.

This was why he didn't want the blond near the room. There was no easing the pink-haired's pain with this kind of procedure, and from Naruto's reaction the last time who looked like he was about to have a heart attack, the doctor did not want to risk it.

Haji's voice got Naruto out of his almost brief catatonic stupor. Composing himself once more, he replied. "I'm fine," he said, resolving to be not be useless this time. He carefully placed his hand on the girl's face, catching her attention. "You're okay, Sakura-chan. You're okay," he whispered to her repeatedly. She opened her eyes at that, appearing to hear his words.

"We're not here. We're at the beach. Remember the beach that time when we did that escort mission? The sky was immaculate, the sand was white, and the waves were amazing. We swam there for hours, remember? We had the best time," he continued to say in a whisper. The nurses looked at Haji for instructions to call security, but no orders were issued.

It was a few moments later when the voice of Sakura came squeaking. "Y-you a-almost drowned…" she replied in a trembling voice.

"Well, yeah. I remember that…" he said, his heavy heart alleviated when Sakura suddenly gripped both his hands. Her hands were deathly cold, so he gently rubbed his fingers on her knuckles, hoping it helped her even just a little.

"Y-you were s-screaming like a g-girl for sensei to s-save you…" she sniffed as she held tighter to him.

"Well, yeah, but I survived, didn't I? Other than that, it was a perfect day," he whined softly, still trying to warm her hands.

"Y-you got sunburn all o-over," she said again, her eyes closing as if trying to relax, not letting go of the blond's hands.

"Alright already. Jeeze. You don't have to remember everything."

"Idiot," she argued, a small smile adorning her face despite the pain and a faint rumbling in her chest that suggested she was trying to laugh.

"I really was," Naruto agreed, relieved that Sakura was distracted, even for just a little bit.

He faintly caught Haji's eyes looking at him with an unreadable expression on his face. It was gone just as quickly as the doctor continued with his work.

Sakura let out a trembling sigh as she tried to sit up with the nurses' help. "I'll be right back," Haji said as he went out the door with a nurse. Sakura tried reaching one hand towards the laces of her robe when Naruto interrupted her. "I got it," he said as he stood to reach the lace on her back, not letting the pink-haired girl protest.

When Sakura felt Naruto stop and felt a rough finger trace her upper back, she knew that he was looking at her scars.

"Does it hurt?" he whispered, not able to walk away. He hadn't noticed it when they were in the bathroom during her episode, but now, he could clearly see visible burns on her upper back which formed some sort of marking. Tsunade had told him about it - her scarring. It had really ruined her skin.

"It did, at the beginning. But it feels okay now," she explained, almost uncomfortable under his scrutiny. She leaned back and looked into his eyes and continued. "Really," she assured him.

Naruto, for his part, remained silent as he finished tying the lace of her robe, carefully weaving her hair as he did so.

With a sharp intake of breath, he finally replied. "I'm so sorry," he whispered, resting his hands gently on her back, wanting to heal her, stop her pain. Sakura, in turn, gently gripped the front of the blond's shirt which she was facing. Naruto remained standing in front of her, but she was afraid to look up to see his face which was probably looked devastated from his words.

"I'm the reason you're hurt. I'm the reason," the blond continued in a choked voice.

Sakura gripped his shirt more tightly this time to stop him. She spoke in a muffled voice because of his proximity. "It's not your fault. We talked about this," she said in all sincerity, remembering how desperate he was to apologize to her in the mountains. That was the first time that she admitted she was mad at him, but not because of her sickness, never because of that. She was only mad because of how easy it was to believe her betrayal.

She was overcome with surprise as Naruto's trembling hand held hers which was gripping his shirt. "I…" he started.

This was interrupted when Haji walked in dressed in his usual white coat, effectively forcing the blond to lean away from Sakura. She looked up to look at Naruto for the first time, seeing guilt and genuine remorse on his face.

"You should lie down for a while before you go home," Haji said, cutting the tension between his patient and her unwelcomed company. He put one large hand on Sakura's forehead. "You're temperature's been normal this week. That's good," the doctor commented.

"Yeah. It's quite a record," Naruto thought loudly, to which the Haji responded by walking away and leaving instructions for the nurse to tend to Sakura.

"He really doesn't like me, does he?" Naruto said, his previous melancholy replaced by his irritation of the pink-haired's doctor.

"Don't take it too personally. He doesn't like many people," explained Sakura, glad that he was already in a light mood.

"Thank Kami he likes you," the blond joked as he helped Sakura lay on the bed.

Sakura laughed, pulling the covers over her shoulder. "That's because I'm his best medical research," she replied, returning his joke.

"No, you're not," Naruto said, suddenly serious. "You're a human being, and everyone's working hard to make sure that you're okay. And you will be. I swear on my life, you will be." He then held her hand and softly squeezed it, assuring her of the truth in his words.

"Okay," Sakura said, not knowing what else to say. Unable to resist the sudden urge to sleep, she closed her eyes, realizing later than Naruto had not let go of her hand.

He found her shivering on the floor when he entered her bedroom, her knees quivering while she desperately attempted to put her arms around her torso. He rushed towards her in a flash, picking her up from the floor and transferring her to the bed.

He had awoken after midnight to someone's voice calling out his name. He thought it was just a dream but after a loud crash he had stumbled right into Sakura's room.

Touching Sakura was like an ice cold sensation. Her low temperature to the point that she was trembling profusely was dangerously

different from the last time she had an episode with a burning fever.

"Sakura-chan… Sakura-chan," Naruto called, making sure that she was conscious.

"C-c-c-cold…" she whispered, clinging tightly to his shirt. The way she was trembling propelled Naruto to a frantic state. Her vitals had been better this week. What the hell was happening?

"N-n-naru… to…" she called, snapping Naruto's attention back to her. This roused the blond from his frantic stupor. He brought his cheek to Sakura's cold ones, trying to assure her of his presence.

"I'm here, Sakura-chan. I'm here," he said while summoning a shadow clone to fetch a syringe from Sakura's medicine cabinet. If he remembered correctly, there was a temperature normalizer in Sakura's cabinet.

"Not that. The other one," he ordered his clone while he quickly rummaged through the cabinet and showed his original what he was fetching. Real Naruto ran his hands up and down Sakura's arm, attempting to get her warm. "That's it. Give it here now," he barked as he kept his eyes on Sakura whose uneven breathing was almost giving him a stroke. He held his hand up, expecting the syringe.

As the clone handed it to him, he quickly uncapped the implement and slightly lifted Sakura's shirt to insert the needle. The contents of the syringe quickly eroded into Sakura's system while the pink-haired girl screamed her lungs out. Like the last time, Naruto ordered to call Dr. Yuy.

"You're gonna be fine, Sakura-chan. You're gonna be just fine," Naruto said, not sure if Sakura was even hearing him. Other than her trembling, Sakura was not responding in any way. Waiting for her temperature to return to normal was like a painful eternity, so he did the only thing he could and climbed on bed and held Sakura against his warm body, all the while praying to all the Gods to make the pink-

haired girl okay. His arms enveloped her torso, while his legs splayed themselves near hers.

Scared. He was fucking scared at the moment. "I'm here. I'm here," he whispered incessantly in her hair, saying it more to himself than Sakura. He did not let go until she was warm and steady in his arms.

By the time that Haji Yuy arrived in Haruno Sakura's room twenty minutes later, his patient was soundly sleeping against the arms of a calmly breathing blond.

Naruto's clone informed him of the sudden dip in his patient's temperature. This was never a good sign especially in Sakura's condition. What was a worse sign was seeing the sight of Uzumaki Naruto intimately holding his patient who seemed like he had no intention of letting go anytime soon.

"Could you disentangle from my patient please?" the irritated doctor said, taking out his instruments from his bag. The emergency situation had obviously calmed down, but he needed to check her vitals.

"I had to keep her warm," the blond replied, not moving an inch from his position.

"And you did. Now I need to check on my patient so I can check on her."

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"I need to keep her warm," the blond argued.

"You let go of her right now or I'll…" Haji snapped, his voice angrier with each word.

"She called my name," the blond interrupted in a whisper, taking the pissed doctor by surprise. "She never wanted me seeing her in pain before. She didn't want to need me. But she called my name this time," Naruto continued, adjusting the blankets over him and Sakura.

"I am the cause of all this. I'm the reason why she's…"

"Dying," Haji pointed out, finishing his sentence. The blond was silent for a while before he answered with in a dead serious tone.

"Well I'm not just gonna stand by and watch her die. I'm not gonna be useless. I'm gonna keep her warm and safe if it kills me." The blond said his words with a finality that stunned the doctor. He had only seen this attitude in one other person, and she was currently in his arms.

"Fine. Just move a little so I can check," he finished with a sigh and proceeded to do so while the blond let out a breath and eased on his hold of the patient.

"What do you think happened?" Naruto asked the doctor while he checked her pulse.

"Sakura is very sick is what happened. Her temperature spikes and dips alternately and there's no way to predict when it's gonna come. Her body is slowly being poisoned from the inside and we don't have a cure," Haji explained, noting how the blond again tightened his hold of the sleeping girl and bent his head to hide it in her hair.

"You're making this difficult," the handsome doctor remarked after almost an hour of making sure that his patient was out of the woods for the time being. Naruto had not moved from his previous position as Sakura slumbered peacefully against his chest. The blond regarded him with an unreadable expression.

"You have no idea how you're hurting her more," he added, knowing very well how the blond was intending to stay by Sakura until the end.

Naruto did not dignify the doctor's warning with a reply; instead, he closed his eyes and focused on the finally even breathing of the girl in his arms.

This was not about forgiveness anymore. This was about Sakura's life. He'd be damned if he let anyone or anything take it away.

What do you think? This is a bit tricky to write, what with Naruto and Sakura struggling to come to terms with each other's company, and well, of course, Haji.

Reviews are always welcome. Aiming for 700!

Til next time guys! Ja ne!

Again

Disclaimer: I don't have anything to do with Naruto or Masashi Kishimoto, the ultimate troll mangaka.

No guys, not dead yet. It's been a rollercoaster of a year, right? Here's my New Year's gift to y'all. :)

Tell me now where was my fault, in loving you with all my heart?

White Blank Page

Chapter 19: Again

When Sakura woke the next morning, Haji was already gone and Naruto was doing the dishes from last night. He had kept himself occupied the whole morning by cleaning the house, and doing the dishes was the last thing on the you-need-to-distract-yourself-so-might-as-well-clean-the-house list. As stealthy as he was as a shinobi, he could never quite master the chore, for the ceramics kept clinking and clunking together as if protesting the blond's attempt to clean them. Anyone who personally knew the blond, upon hearing the horrible tremors made by the dishes and cups, would immediately associate it to be Naruto's handiwork from a mile away.

"Damn it," he quietly cursed the domestic chore. It didn't bother him that he had to occasionally do the housekeeping in Sakura's home, but doing the dishes this morning proved to be so loud and clumsy that he worried it would wake the sedated patient slumbering in the nearby room.

And wake her, it did.

"Hey," came her raspy voice as she leaned on the kitchen's wall, gently rubbing her eyes with her left hand.

"Hey," he returned, cursing his damned luck. Arm-deep into the soapy suds, he stopped abusing the current plate with the scrub and turned to look at her. More than ten hours of sleep did not help get rid of the dark circles under Sakura's eyes. In fact, her pale skin reinforced those dark colors, overshadowing her green orbs. It never ceased to bother Naruto how tired and weak she looked. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

The pink-haired girl didn't answer the question, instead, meekly smiled at the inquiry. Last night had been a horrible episode, and they both knew that. Naruto tried in vain to do anything else other than overthink how Sakura's episodes became more and more frequent. Every episode, every convulsion, every visible pain she went through only served to strengthen his guilt over everything he has caused the poor girl.

Haji had told him that severe temperature changes in her body was a regular occurrence, but that didn't make it okay. The more it happens, the faster her body deteriorates. It had to be monitored, and Naruto took it upon himself that he would.

Leaving the sink, he walked over to where Sakura was and raised his left hand to place on her forehead. "Oh," he said. Realizing that his hands up to his arms were a soapy mess and were therefore not up for the job, he stepped closer and leaned his left cheek on her forehead, focusing on her warmth or the lack thereof. He stayed there for a few seconds, momentarily forgetting what he was supposed to do and noted how Sakura still smelled like Sakura despite the strong scent of medicine and antiseptics.

When they were young, Naruto loved smelling her, a creepy habit as Sai had called it. Sometimes he would openly lean over her and fill his lungs with her scent, his chest heaving as if trying to lock in the air he inhaled. Of course, this would earn him a smack in the face. "My God Naruto! It's just soap! Try taking a bath more often and

you'd smell it on yourself too," she said one time when she caught him.

Sakura didn't smell like strawberries as her hair color would suggest. She smelled like mint with a sweetness he could never quite identify. She smelled like home. He tried explaining it to Sai once before, but that just earned him an earful f how obsessed and creepy he was.

A few seconds more and Sakura leaned away from the blond. "What are you doing?" she asked, surprised at the sudden contact with his warmth.

"Sorry. I was just checking your temperature," he answered, startled for a bit but smiled immediately afterwards. "It seems normal today. That's good," he added, shrugged and then got back to the sink without further explaining himself.

Sakura stood there, dumbfounded with the previous display of proximity. She remembered calling for Naruto last night in her cold fevered state. She hadn't meant to call for him, but the need to do it came anyway. It had been like falling off the deep edge, drowning in an ice cold sea of nothingness that whatever warmth she could hold on to was lost until she called for him. His warmth felt like salvation last night and she was sure that he had stayed the whole night with her, otherwise she wouldn't have remembered Haji yelling at him over staying.

She clutched her chest with the realization that she didn't want to acknowledge. All those times she spent getting used to fact that he was never coming back was coming undone and it was not the least bit okay. Her own training was betraying her.

"Do you want breakfast, Sakura-chan?" he asked, his back turned to her as he was drying his arms and hands.

He turned around, waiting for her answer. Seeing her with an unreadable expression on her face and clutching her chest had him worried in a second. He came to her in a flash and placed his hands

on her shoulders. "Hey, are you okay? You want to lie down?" he said, alarmed that she still seemed dazed.

"Huh?" she finally said, meeting his worried eyes. "Yes, I'm fine. Just spaced out for a bit there," she explained in vain as she once again tried to put some space between them. He let her step away with an expression on his face that said that he knew she was lying. So she did the one thing she could think of and turned around.

Naruto called out as he realized that Sakura was suddenly walking towards the door. "Where are you going?"

"Out. I'm just going for a walk," she explained, not bothering to turn around to look at him as she reached for the handle.

"Oh no, you don't." He walked so fast that he was already blocking the door and letting go of her hold of the handle in a second. The way her breath painfully hitched when he touched her hand did not go unnoticed by the blond. "You're just recovering from last night. You haven't even had breakfast yet."

"Please let me out. I need to be alone," she pleaded, looking away from him.

"Why?"

"It's important."

"Okay. Why?"

"We need groceries." Okay, that was lame.

"I stocked up two days ago."

"I need to buy my medicine."Still lame.

"You have at least a month's supply in the cabinet."

"I… I need to go shopping."Worst comeback ever. Her brains had probably went down the drain the minute she got sick.

"It's seven a.m. Stores aren't open yet. And you hate shopping."

"Naruto…" she warned.

"Sakura-chan…" he mimicked her tone, unfazed by her attempts to reason with him. For the first time, she looked at him and tried to think of something that would leave her alone with her thoughts. She needs to be without him for a while so she could put herself together. For some reason, his concept of personal space and respect for the same was currently inexistent.

Sakura let out a long breath, and for a moment Naruto thought he had won. Smiling, he started towards the kitchen once more when she spoke again.

"You need clothes," she pointed out.

"What?"

"You need to get out and get more clothes for you. Have you been wearing those for a week?" she said, smirking.

Not a week actually, more like four days. In his haste to move into Sakura's house and with all the drama that's been going on, he had brought only so much clothing. The ones he had on looked like rags already and he hadn't done laundry yet.

"What's that got to do with anything?" he said, thinking she was just trying to change the subject. When Sakura didn't respond, he narrowed his eyes and stepped closer to the girl. She sidestepped him in an attempt to get away.

"You're planning something," he accused.

"What?"

"You're planning something," he repeated, mistaking her sudden change of the subject to be an attempt to deploy an evil plan or something. "Why else would you want to be alone?"A minute ago she was itching to go out, and now, she was urging him to go out.

"I'm not," she defended as she crossed her arms on her chest. She just wants to be alone for the sake of it, for crying out loud.

"I don't trust you to be alone," he said, airing his serious aura of distrust towards Sakura.

"Well, you would have to because you need new clothes. You look like a pauper in those."

"No." She had to roll her eyes at that.

"Just go. Leave a bunshin here if you want." She would take a clone rather than spend time with its annoying original.

"You might kill it."

"You're crazy."

"You're coming with me then," he finally said after a long silence.

"What?"

"You're coming with me to my apartment. That way, you'll get your walk and I'll get more clothes. It's a win-win," he said, copying the smirk she had on earlier.

"I'm not coming with you," she said, shaking her head with disapproval.

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not."

"Sakura-chan, believe me, I can do this all day. Unless you want to tell me what you're planning, we'll do this my way," he said, knowing how Sakura gets frustrated when he acts like a toddler.

"…"

"What's it gonna be?" He smiled. He had definitely won this round. That and the fact that there was no way in hell he'd leave her alone, he thought this was a brilliant compromise.

"You're an idiot." Why do all of her plans backfire these days?

"I know, Sakura-chan. I know."

He was starting to believe that he may be the stupidest person on Earth, as Sasuke AND Sakura pointed out multiple times during their genin days. Maybe it was true, because of all the god-awful plans that he hatched without even thinking about the consequences, taking Sakura to his apartment has to be the worst of all yet. She had uncharacteristically whined the whole way, expressing her disdain of the situation in every imaginable curse possible and now he knew why. The moment he and Sakura stepped into huge apartment, he wanted to kick himself for not volunteering the small information that his apartment was (or is) his and Hyuuga Hinata's apartment. He was officially the king of not thinking things through.

The apartment was on the upper side of Konoha, too fancy for his taste, but Naruto had been lived there for two years with Hinata. The set of furniture was 's a touch of Naruto's taste here and there, but altogether, it had looked like something out of the pages of a home catalogue.

But after the wedding that didn't take place, the Hyuugas had taken all her belongings and clothes, leaving the apartment mostly half furnished. Moreover, the last time he was here, Naruto, threw around and broke several things in his rage and left them like that. Hence, the current state of the place.

"Wow," Sakura wheezed out. Whether the statement was out of amazement or otherwise, Naruto didn't know.

"Yeah," he said, picking up shards or any object that Sakura might trip over. "Um, take a seat, Sakura-chan. I'll just grab some stuff," he said as he took her arm and tried to lead her to the couch. Sakura stopped midway in front of an untoppled cabinet in the living room. Naruto turned around to see that she had picked up and was holding a picture frame with an expression of vague indifference. It was a picture of him and Hinata. In fact, it was just one of a number of their picture atop the cabinet. Naruto didn't know whether he should be saying something right now or do anything just to break the thick silence in the apartment.

"I meant it, you know?" Sakura said, gently placing the picture frame back and trying to arrange the other pictures with it. Naruto reached out for her in silent question when she continued. "When I said you should talk things out with Hinata-san and everything that happened. I meant it."

After a moment, Naruto replied, putting the frame face down to the surface. "There'll be a time for that."

"Naruto…." she started. Feeling that this was brewing to be another argument between them, he proceeded towards the bedroom to unceremoniously change the subject.

"We should get out of here soon. I'm getting hungry already," he said, leaving the pink-haired girl in the living room. It wasn't like he was burying himself in denial or anything, but right now, dealing with the Hyuugas was not his main concern. It was a question of priorities and her life was his number one with a goddamn bullet.

"You can't just avoid this," she followed, not realizing that she was following him to the bedroom.

You're one to talk, he thought and debated on voicing the irony of her words but decided not to. It really wasn't a good idea to

antagonize a sick person but Sakura always manages to coax him to engage in a game of verbal assaults where nobody wins and everybody suffers after. Granted, sometimes it was his fault, but damn it, it's getting on his nerves!

Breathing deeply, he reigned on his arguing instincts and responded in a low voice. "I'm not." He looked at her quiet sincerity. "I swear, I'm not," he repeated. "But do you honestly think that right now, I'm capable of functioning for anything else other than making sure that you're okay? Do you?" he said and softly smiled at her. He would probably go down in history as the worst best human ever for what happened to Sakura. He can accept that, but not before he made sure that she would live.

That smile he gave her. It was so genuine that it stopped whatever retort she had right then and there.

Seeing that the she wasn't going to further argue on the painful subject of his postponed nuptials, Naruto returned to rummaging his closet and reminded himself to get more than one month's worth of them. No way was he coming back to this apartment again.

"I'll wait in the living room," she whispered, walking away.

"'Kay," he said, smiling at himself for winning this time by actually being mature.

He came out a few minutes later with a duffel bag of clothes and found her on the couch. She was sitting but her head lay on the couch's big arm, her chest rhythmically moving in a silent beats. She was already sleeping. Did putting up with him all the time make her tired? And it was only morning. He wished that she wouldn't sleep so much because it scared him. But then again, when she was awake, they always fought.

Leaving the bag on the floor, he sighed as he crouched on her sleeping form and took hold of her legs to put it up the couch.

"Stubborn sleepyhead," he mumbled as he walked back to the bedroom to find her a decent blanket.

She opened her eyes to the soft tunes of his whistling. When she realized that this was neither her room nor her house, she sat up as quickly as she could only to be hindered by the winter blanket wrapped around her.

He was sitting sideways from her, cross-legged on the floor against a low coffee table, rapt in taking various things from a box written with a squiggly note of "storage". Her sudden movement made him turn his head towards her. He grinned and said, "Hey," repeating how she initiated their conversation this morning.

"I fell asleep," she said. And from what the old clock at the end of the room indicated, it was already noon.

"You fell asleep," he replied, still grinning. "It's okay. I had to fix up here anyway," he added and returned to his task. Finding nothing to do while she slept, he decided to take out some of his storage from the cabinet and tidy things up. This particular box held a bunch of his stuff from his old apartment which he couldn't bring to throw away - his ceramic ramen bowl, his hideous night cap, his -

"Is that your genin jumpsuit?" she commented in an amused tone and then chuckled when he held it out in front of her.

"Hey, this is the last one! It has sentimental value. Don't make fun of it," he defended with a pout. All his other orange jumpsuits got ruined when he was training with Jiraiya. This one should be preserved in the museum or something.

She just rolled her eyes and arranged herself on the sizable couch. "This couch is so comfortable," she said. She could literally sleep here all day. But then again, that could be because of other reasons.

"Yeah. That was the first thing I bought with my first ANBU paycheck," he grinned again. It was more comfortable than the bed. It was damn expensive, but it was so worth it. He often slept there. Rummaging once more in the box, his hand found a short string tied to two bells. Holding it up, he moved his fingers as the bells chimed.

"Remember this?" he asked, smiling at her. Of course she remembered. He wouldn't forget the day the two of them beat their silver-haired teacher for a couple of bells.

"It feels like so long ago," she just said, amused by the grinning blond with his dangling bells. He had the expression of a cat playing with a ball of string. But she understood, that day meant a lot to both of them, and to Kakashi-sensei as well. "I hope Sensei's alright. Neji and Sasuke too," she said, remembering that their team was out there right now in God knows with a lost cause.

"I'm sure they're just fine, Sakura-chan. They'd sooner killer each other than be killed by some rogue ninja out there," he joked, thinking how pissed off Neji would be right now with Sasuke. The two shinobi had never gotten along when they were genin, and it was worse now. Seeing that Sakura wasn't the least bit amused by his quip, he got up, crouched in front of the pink-haired girl and held her hand.

"They'll be okay. I promise," he said as he reached out and touched her hand. "I'll personally hunt them down and beat them up if they don't come back soon," he added, teasing her to ease the tension. He had no intention of letting her know how scared he was that she's sick. He'd sooner break his own bones than do that again.

"You're so weird," she replied, not knowing what else to say. His hand felt warm, and for a moment it mattered so much.

"I know, right," came the resounding voice of a third person in the room. Naruto's head turned around just in time to find a smiling Sai closing the door behind him.

"What the hell are you doing here?" the blond asked as he straightened up.

"Looking for you, obviously. You weren't at her house or at the hospital, so I got your present address from the tower," the pale-faced shinobi replied in a bored tone as he passed Naruto and sat in the couch beside Sakura. "How are you feeling, hag?"Sai asked as he turned towards the pink-haired girl and touched her forehead.

"I'm okay, Sai. Thank you," Sakura replied, touched at the shinobi's sudden expression of concern. His smile seemed genuine too. Naruto seemed surprised as well. "That's good. We can draw some pictures later then," he added.

"What's up, Sai?" asked the male blond, tucking his memorabilia back in the box.

"How about you be a good host first and bring us some tea, Dickless?"

"How about you stop being such a jerk?" It seemed like Sai was perpetually trying to piss the blond off. Hadn't he learned from the black eye he sported from their earlier encounter?

"Don't start, you two," Sakura intervened. "Why are you here, Sai?" Sakura had to admit though. She was thankful that he stopped by to check on her.

A full ten seconds passed as Sai stayed silent and looked around the world.

"Oh come on Sai, just spit it out!" Naruto yelled impatiently. The pale shinobi had to sigh at that. Naruto and his comedically short fuse.

"I have some intel on Sakura's attack. That one during your wedding day," he finally said.

Whatever snide comment the blond had toward Sai died down as Naruto took a deep breath and his lips formed a thin line. Sakura, for her part, took a full minute to register the shinobi's words. She remembered that attack from the two faceless figures on the school grounds - the unfamiliar markings on the ground, the way one of them slit her wrists, that feeling she felt that she was going to die right then and there.

"Seeing as you were too busy being Sakura's unwelcomed guest, I took the liberty of looking into it for you. I figured you would want to know." Even with his attempts to make his message light, Sai's tone was serious now. He only ever used that tone whenever something was terribly wrong.

"On whose clearance?" Naruto said, walking out of the living room and towards the kitchen to avoid Sakura's expression and to actually make tea. Tsunade had promised to personally take over the investigation on the attack and he had never got a chance to talk to Sakura about it. For once, he was thankful for Sai's initiative and help.

"Mine," Sai replied, following Naruto and leaving the pink-haired girl in the living room. "Let me help with that," he offered, taking cups from the cupboard as the blond heated the water. Only the sound of moving ceramic filled the room for a while as they did so. The sight of two high ranking shinobi doing such a domestic task was almost amusing until Sai placed a scroll on top the kitchen counter.

Naruto almost crumpled the scroll senseless as he read its contents, not sure what reaction to make.

"Hyuuga puppets?" he said as he fought to keep his breathing still.

"These are classified files from Root. Those that attacked her, they're exclusive only to the Hyuuga leaders. They're effective for tenketsu and attack practice, but these can also be manipulated by chakra in long ranges. They've never been used in field battle, though. They're basically clan soldiers," Sai explained. They had stopped preparing

the tea now and just wordlessly faced the counter. However unusual or unstable Sai's personality was, he would risk anything for his precious people, and that included Sakura.

Naruto took a deep breath and started to walk away, only to face a straight faced Sakura. She had heard the whole thing.

He looked at her with an expression that was almost too intense to keep her in place. Without leaving her face, he said to Sai, "Why don't you keep Sakura-chan company for a while, Sai?"

"No," she warned.

"I'll be back in a while, Sakura-chan," he returned with a smile that never quite reached his eyes and started walking.

"You're not going," she warned again, gripping fabric of his shirt from behind.

"Come on, Sakura-chan. Just this morning you were trying to get rid of me," he joked.

"You're not going." She gripped his shirt tighter in an effort to pull him back. "You are not that stupid!" Whatever he was intendinhizg to do, it was clear that it had something to do with the Hyuugas.

"You know what? Maybe, I am," he snorted as he gripped her hand from behind, trying to loosen her grip of his shirt. "Be a good girl and stay with stay with Sai for a while."

"If those files are from Root and you go public with it, they'd know it was from Sai!" she reasoned. From what she heard, not only did he steal those files, he had broken the Root's code on confidentiality. That immediately translated to

"I can take care of myself," Sai huffed behind them. He wasn't helping.

She gripped his shirt impossibly tighter "Everything happens for a reason. You go to the Hyuugas and you burn your bridges with them. You won't be Hokage just because of - " She was suddenly interrupted as he stiffened and abruptly turned to face her, livid.

"Just because?" He drawled. "Just because? You think attempted murder is just because?" He started towards her, his blue orbs darkened in anger. She really did it this time. Whatever control he had came crumbling down from her dumb reasoning. He wasn't going to be the Hokage for politics.

For the first time in a long time, Sakura felt scared of him. But this wasn't about her, it was about his future.

"You are about to marry into this clan. With what's already happened, you don't need more friction with them."

"Why are you talking like a freaking matchmaker?"

"You know I'm right. Think about your future."

"YOU DON'T GET TO DECIDE MY FUTURE!" Two pairs of orbs widened at the blond's rare display of riveted outburst. The blond didn't even realize that his eyes were reddening into slits. "Stop being this stupid, Sakura. You pulled this shit three years ago and I just stood back and let you. I'm telling you now, you don't get to decide who I care and don't care about and you sure as hell can't decide my future." There it was. The truth. Ino had been right when she said that he would be right to be mad at what she did. She wasn't the only one who gets to be angry at the situations, he was too.

And then she was crying again, absorbing the brunt of the blond's words.

I had my reasons," she sobbed out, salty tears streaking down her cheeks.

"I don't care," he blurted. He became aware of how angry he was as she was wiping her tears with the sleeves of her sweater. It seemed to matter at that instant that she was truly hurt by what he said and looked like a scolded little girl.

"Please don't go. I know you think you're doing this for me. But please don't go. Please," she pleaded again and again, gripping his shirt once more.

"Why are you trying to protect them?" he replied now in a hushed tone, closing his hand over hers.

"Not them. I'm trying to protect you."

Sai, having witnessed the whole argument, decided to step in. "Maybe you should take her home, Naruto," he suggested.

Naruto sighed as he closed the lights in her bedroom. Sakura was sleeping again, albeit more tired than she already was because of him.

" *There'll be another time for this, Dickless. You need to take care of her first. I'll take care of this,"* Sai had advised him.

He wasn't quite sure what to do anymore. It was exhausting. Kakashi-sensei's team better come home soon or he'll go crazy.

"We keep fighting," she heard him whisper in the dark.

A long pause followed. "Yeah," he agreed, closing the door behind him.

To be continued.

Sorry this took so long, guys. Just needed time to update this, is all.

Thanks for the 700+ reviews. Til Valentine's Day! *wink wink*

Edge

Disclaimer: No, don't own Naruto himself. Not the manga either.

Author's Note: I'm back, baby! Someone has to be happy about that. I gotta tell you guys, it gets harder and harder to write the next chapters for this story. I started this one last May for crying out loud. And I've only just finished.

Sorry guys. That's my bad. I promise I'll haul my ass off to produce the next chapters. But until then, hope you like this one!

Chapter 20: Edge

And the songbirds are singing, like they know the score.

And I love you, I love you, I love you, like never before.

Songbird

She was tired of fighting. It was a feat unbecoming and useless to someone who was doomed to lose anyway. Every struggle was every point of defeat, every breath an insurmountable challenge. The bones and muscles in her body were screaming for rest they have never gotten in years. This was what it feels like to be dying, slowly, painfully, where there was no semblance of release.

Death had to be release, it had to be salvation. It was like being at the edge of the cliff, more than willing to let go of a thorny branch one has been holding on to for far too long. She was ready to let go. Ready to free her bloody hand from the thorns that clawed her skin, ready to fall to the dark abyss, ready to release her last breath. More so than anything else, she just wanted to rest. She had done her

part, hadn't she? So why wasn't she allowed to let go? It was too damn unfair.

At first, it was a whisper, no more than an undertone with the gust of the wind. A faceless voice, calling and calling. It became a stronger call from above the cliff, insistent and harsh with every repetition.

"Sakura-chan…" it called. Again and again, as if waiting for her to acknowledge and reply.

Of course she wasn't going to answer. For all the hope that that voice had to offer, there was no use in holding on to it. Nothing can reel her in, not even this voice.

"Hey. Come on, wake up…". On and on and on and on. Kami, it was annoying. It was annoying and had she any strength, she would have climbed all the way off that cliff and punch the owner of that voice halfway to hell just so it would go away and leave her alone.

The desire to just tell that voice off had never been stronger. So she took a deep breath. And for the first time, she summoned all her strength to do something. By the time she opened her eyes to realize that she had been dreaming, she had woken up to a pair of arms around here, restricting and reassuring at the same time.

She looked down to Naruto, his face obscured by his blond hair as he held tightly onto her. She realized he had pulled her onto a sitting position, holding her, his face gently trying to bury onto her shoulder blade.

"Are you okay?" His voice was slightly muffled as he spoke through her shirt. "You were having a nightmare."

But it wasn't just a nightmare, it was worse, almost a premonition of her deteriorating state which even in her sleep would not leave her alone. The worse her condition gets, the more frequent it happens when she sleeps. Sleeping wasn't rest for her anymore, it was a

painful vision. But it was also a promise of the end, and every time she was closer and closer.

All thoughts on how to respond to the blond had left her as Naruto raised his head up for the first time and looked at her, really looked at her with an expression that shook the pink haired girl to her core. His eyes were red and were threatening to shed tears and his whole face was pained, as if someone had been physically beating the life out of him. The world didn't know that the blond was capable of such a pained expression, but here it was in front of Sakura and she didn't know the first thing to do about it. Seeing him with that scared was unsettling, like trying to take your first breath after a long moment underwater and realizing that there was no air to breathe. More than that, he was trembling, shaking like a leaf.

"Are you okay?" he repeated, choking every word.

The intensity of the moment did not occur to Sakura until he finally looked down and tears fell onto the mattress, tears that were not hers.

"What is it?" she spoke for the first time, wondering if she was having another unpleasant dream. If it were, this was admittedly worse. His hands were suddenly twisting uncomfortably around her arms, unwilling to loosen their grip as if she was a prisoner trying to get away. She attempted to grasp his arms in reply.

He took a few ragged breaths, but after several more, instead of calming down, he whimpered and buried his head again, this time on the the spot between her neck and shoulder, holding her tighter.

"I was trying to wake you up. You wouldn't for a while. I thought you were…" He couldn't continue after that.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, deciding to stroke his back like she would to children when she was calming them down. "Really, I'm fine," she continued, talking to a spot on her room's wall as she couldn't make the blond release her and look at her so he would realize that she

was okay and alive, for the time being. The clock above her dresses indicated that it was a little past two in the morning. She must have moaned in her sleep loud enough to wake the blond ninja with the heightened senses.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Sakura-chan," a mantra he had said, chanted like before until he was out of breath.

"I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry," he continued. He must have been referring to their most recent fight where he blew up and made her cry.

It was very painful to hear him suffer saying those words. And it made her want to cry too. Instead, she tightened her hold of him in return.

"It's fine. I'm not mad, Naruto." She continued stroking his back. He had every right to be mad at her when they fought. She'd be mad at her too, she explained. Lack of sleep and emotional instability had rendered her blond companion to be an inconsolable boy. She could feel his guilt oozing through his tears.

"I'd give it all back. I would die for you," he said finality and willingness that made Sakura snap and forcefully pulled his head back to look at her the second time that night.

His last sentence made her furious beyond comprehension. Didn't he already how much more important he was than she was? Didn't he understand how stupid it was for him to say those words?

"Look at me," she started, quiet with frustration. In the semi-darkness, she held his repentant face with both hands. "You are not allowed to say that ever again. You hear me? I gave my all to make sure that doesn't happen" she choked. Yes, admittedly, it was hypocritical of her to insist, but for everything that happened, he wasn't supposed to suffer the way that she was. No words could ever explain that to him.

Her words calmed him a little and he responded by enveloping the hands that were on his cheeks and softly settling his forehead on hers. It was the first time that he felt some semblance of warmth in her. He had caused it, as his skin never left hers.

"You can't die," he begged with closed eyes, as if the choice were up to her. "You can't die," he repeated, refusing to lose contact and now pressing his hands on the skin near her chest to feel her heartbeat from a heart that was ready to give out.

She wasn't at liberty to promise him something like that. No one could.

"I'm still here. Right here," she whispered to his ear, unable to assure him of anything other than that. She nudged his forehead with her big one hard enough to get his attention.

"Then stay. Stay with me," he pleaded again.

"Naruto…" she pleaded back, ready to argue that they shouldn't get into this at two in the morning, both exhausted and not in the proper state of mind.

But he pushed again. "Stay. Please." His blue eyes bore through the darkness and into her green ones as he let her go and held both her hands. "Just stay."

He was unreasonable, demanding of his request. He was out of line and didn't understood . He was a scared boy right now. It was a part of Naruto that she had unwittingly coaxed out of him.

"Whatever you want."

That morning, she woke up with no trace of Naruto except for a distinct lingering scent and an unsettling feeling that he had held her through the night.

"I think he might be going crazy," she confided off-handedly as Haji led her through the hospital corridors. He was walking her to the home for the elderly which adjacent to the hospital building. Sakura was to join some kind of tea party.

"Well that's very reassuring for the next Hokage. I'll be sure to cheer for him at his inauguration," Haji replied.

This was the first check-up she had without the annoying blond hovering like a mother hen over his patient and asking all kinds of medical questions that his little brain couldn't memorize much less understand.

Apparently, Naruto arranged for Shizune, the Hokage's assistant to drop Sakura at the hospital because he had "errands" to do. He merely left a note for his patient. Whatever the reason, Haji thanked the stars for it. A day without that guy was a good day for the unsociable doctor.

Besides, it gave him the chance to chance to check on his patient in peace and spend time with her for a little bit.

"I'm serious though!" the pink-haired girl tugged on his arm's sleeve and stopped her tracks. Sakura didn't seem to mind being alone today, but her comment on the next Hokage's mental stability was apparently an alarming matter.

"Last night. He's… different," she explained, having succeeded in halting her escort and getting his full attention.

Haji had to sigh. Of course, whether physically present or not, that blond idiot would be annoying him and his patient. "How different?" he obliged.

"I'm not sure. One minute he's pissed at me, we're yelling at each other and the next, he'll be… I don't know how to call it."

"Different?" the doctor suggested, sensing the girl's loss for words.

"Yeah. Different."

"He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"What? No. Of course not!" she defended.

Assessing the truth to her statement, Haji narrowed his eyes and just cursed the Heavens for not having the emotional quotient needed for these kinds of talks.

"This is why Neji and I didn't want that… that moronic jock hanging around you so much. He's not good for you." That was to put it lightly.

"You sound like a mother," she replied, placing both her fragile arms on her hips.

"I FEEEL like the mother in this conversation," he said, exasperated. "Look, I'm only looking out for you. I don't need to remind you that it's good for you to be stressed about anything right now. And the last thing you need to worry about is that moron. He's as healthy as a horse."

"God, you're unhelpful," she gave in as they resumed their walk.

"Speaking of unhelpful. Why are you even going to those geezer party anyway? You're sick, remember?"

"Naruto and I met Ichi-san and his wife Miho-san during dialysis. They invited us. It would be rude not to come," Sakura explained, grateful for her doctor's company and concern.

"It's also rude to replace the sugar container at the hospital pantry with salt, but you don't see me apologizing to the nurses for it."

"You're unbelievable." She had to chuckle at the doctor's concept of revenge for those unruly nurses at the hospital. Whether he admitted it or not, Haji had a sense of humor and was part prankster. He and Naruto could actually get along if they tried.

"You know they deserved it for messing with the couch springs."

"Yes, they did," she agreed as they reached entered the home's corridors.

"Are you sure you don't need me to stay with you?"

She turned to him with a grin. "Come on. That would be like taking your own daughter to the prom."

He rolled his eyes to her teasing. If this was what it's gonna be like to have a daughter, well, that's just not gonna happen.

"Besides, you have that important meeting with the hospital board."

"I can skip it."

"No, you can't. Just go! I'll be fine," she said, giving her escort a gentle shove towards the hospital.

"Mou…"

"Excuse me, Miss. Is this guy bothering you? Cause I can call security if you want," a voice explained interrupted their banter, obviously trying to repress a chuckle. Sakura and Haji turned around to a smiling Naruto, hands in his pocket, dressed in a casual black polo shirt and grey jeans,.

"Oh, Christ," Haji groaned. Of course it was him. This was his punishment for messing with the nurses.

"Naruto," Sakura called as the blond approached them. "Your errands," she inquired.

"All done. Besides, I wouldn't want to miss the party of the century. We promise we'd come," he joked. "You look pretty, Sakura-chan."

Even Haji felt the sincerity in those words. His patient was wearing her usual thick sweater, but visible under it was a slightly longer

spring green summer dress with streaks of white and a ribbon on the waist. It suited her.

Sakura uttered her thanks and smiled in return. Despite his apparent annoyance with the blond, Haji somehow felt like he was intruding on a moment between the two.

Naruto beat him to breaking the silence as he offered his hand to Sakura-chan, leading her towards the door.

"I'll be taking your daughter to the prom now, Mam. I promise to get her home before midnight," he jibed to the long-haired doctor, even finishing with a wink.

Haji made a disgusting sound at this, ignoring the moron before bidding goodbye to his patient.

"You're right, Sakura. Batshit crazy," was all he said.

Miho-san was right. There were more women in the home, and most of them made it their personal mission to each get a dance from him. Granted, it was flattering, but he suspected anyone below fifty years old would be eye candy to this kind of event. He should take Lee here sometimes.

The weekly party at the home was bustling with lots of activities - bingo, all-you-can-eat whole grain cracker buffet and of course, dancing to old people song.

He was on his… tenth?… eleventh?… dance now. Good thing he learned this kind of stuff, dancing, with Ero-senin. Otherwise, it would be horrible to step on blushing old women's feet.

As he gently twirled his current partner, Emiko-san, a stout woman with thinning hair, his eyes found Sakura sitting beside Ichi-san who was in a wheelchair, chuckling at something the old man had said.

Last night had passed like a fast blur and a long pause at the same time. Last time was the most horrifying thing he had ever had to experience. Thinking Sakura was actually dead, she felt like she was dead, having her unresponsive in his arms, being unable to do anything about it but say her name had caused him to lose him freaking mind. Especially after the way he treated her before.

He never wanted to experience death, her death. It was out of the question. Which was why he had refused to let her go, held her for the remainder of the night to make sure that she breathed every breath, to make sure that her heart was beating the whole time. Which was why he had asked her to stay. In his delusional state and desperation to keep her that night, he pleaded for something he knew she couldn't give. And she acquiesced, and no matter how crazy, he believed her.

It was an intense feeling. He had never been grateful for someone else's heart beating. Seeing her, alive and breathing was a heaven that he was grateful for, no matter how temporary.

"Don't worry, son. Ichi ain't gonna steal her," his dance partner jibed.

"Huh?" he said, confused as he looked down on Emiko.

"Your girl over there." She pointed to Sakura with her head, who seemed very content with her company. "Ichi's too damn loyal to Miho. He ain't gonna make a move on her," she explained amusedly.

Choosing to ignore her taunt, Naruto merely smiled swayed his partner to the other side of the room.

Emiko grunted in mild annoyance for her handsome dance partner's silence. She smiled however as eventually the blond's gaze kept going back to the pink-haired girl.

As the current song neared its end, she halted her feet which consequently caused her partner to stumble with a "Whu?".

"Tell you what, handsome. Since you've been a perfect gentleman this whole time, this is gonna be your last dance. Imma fend off the ladies while you go get your dance with pinky over there," she said with a wink.

She didn't even let Naruto start to either say some kind of explanation or apologize for his being distracted while dancing.

"Go on child, dance with her! I gots a good song for you."

"Emiko-san…" the blond tried again, scratching the back of his head.

"Ain't you fought a bunch of demons and evil shinobi and whatnot?! You're scared of asking girl to dance?!"

"Oba-san…"

"You useless boy!" she exclaimed as she stalked over to the pink-haired girl's table.

Emiko-san was a rotund woman, but damn, she was faster than Lee without his training weights. By the time that he had struggled through the women waiting in line for a dance, she was already talking animatedly with Sakura seeming confused and Ichi-san amused with his wife Miho smiling quietly at her side.

"So, whaddaya say, pinky? Can you give us women a break and dance with this dummy?" Emikos said, her mouth upturned from ear to ear, as if to say "You ain't backing out of this one."

"Sa… Sakura-chan, you don't need to, really. You must be tired and…" he was talking to the pink-haired girl as the big woman interrupted again.

"You idiot! Look at her with the beautiful dress. You think she came here to sit in the corner…" She continued on babbling even as the new song came to the dance floor. Man, was this woman butting on things she didn't have business with. The entrance of the new song

with the slow beat of guitar and piano drowned the rest of her speech.

"Kami, you gon' give me a heart attack, boy…"

Naruto rolled his eyes at this exasperating woman and pleaded with Sakura with a pained look. She understood and stood up just to effectively silence Emiko who had just smirked. As soon as Naruto took Sakura's hand, she sat down and wagged her brows at the old couple beside her.

For you, there'll be no more crying

For you, the sun will be shining

And I feel that when I'm with you, it's alright

"She's a handful, isn't she?" she chuckled lightly as soon as they were out of earshot.

"Yeah. Thanks for saving me," he replied with a grin. Back to the task at hand, he thought, as he took one slightly shaking hand and gently placed it on Sakura's waist while the other held her hand. She let him lead her in a gentle sway as she took a step closer to him. He supported her light frame, almost like dancing with a mannequin made with cotton. So soft, more importantly, fragile.

To you, I'll give the world

To you, I'll never be cold

Cause I feel that when I'm with you, it's alright

Content with her proximity but still a little nervous, he settled with looking at a spot at the floor "You look beautiful, Sakura-chan."

"Enough with that already. It's just a dress and braided hair," she answered slightly to his neck.

"No, it's you," he replied immediately. That earned him a heartful laugh.

"You think you're gonna smooth talk your way to me like with the other ladies, huh?" she said as she pulled back to look at him.

His response was just to tighten his hold to her, like he had the last night, and said "No."

And the songbirds are singing like they know the score

And I love you, I love you, I love you, like never before

It was too much to look at him, painful even, so she went back to her spot, facing his collar, and they swayed again.

"Are you mad at me?" he asked.

"For what?"

"Last night."

"No."

"No?"

"No."

And I wish you all the love in the world

But most of all, I wish it for myself

"Why though?"

After a deep sigh, he answered. "You were pulling away. I felt you pulling away. I pulled you back the only way I know how."

"…"

"Don't pull away," he whispered.

He felt her removing one hand to wipe something from her face.

"Don't."

"Please." He pleaded into her ear. So close. Softly.

"I can't." She whimpered and started to pull away, looking anywhere else but him. He had to do something or he was going to lose her.

And I love you, I love you, I love you, like never before

It was a brief kiss. Her lips were salty and soft, chapped from being sick all the time. Moreover, she was unresponsive. Nonetheless, it was the closest he had been to her. He poured all his emotions to that kiss, the only way to pull her, pull her back where she belonged. With him. Alive and with him.

As long as he thought that kiss lasted, she stepped away from him just as fast, her green eyes red from the tears and yet devoid of emotion.

The song had ended. Other women were now clamoring to where they were for a dance.

"Sakura-chan…"

She was just staring. At him. Through him.

"Say something."

Instead, she unhurriedly turned her back from him and started walking away.

To be continued.

That's it. Hope it's not too short. Reviews anyone? :)

PS. Thank to Fleetwood Mac for the inspiration.

Surrounded

Dislaimer: Nope, don't own Naruto. After the crappy manga ending, don't want to own him anyway.

Author's note: Yes, I'm sorry I'm effin' late. Yes, I am extremely disappointed with how canon worked out. At least, I know that I am part of the eighty percent of the fandom that hated that piss poor ending, not to mention the abomination of The Last. Yes, I will still finish this story because f*ck Kishimoto and his second generation spawns.

Thank you for your support. Hope you're still with me on this ride.

Chapter 21: Surrounded

I can only imagine what you're going through, babe,

But please

When you don't know what to believe in

Let me be your religion

It's a fucked up world that we live in

So let me be your religion

Religion

It was the perfect day for a funeral, if such a day existed.

The sun was slightly peeking from a surrounding of clouds, seeping its warmth and soft light upon the grass. Enough wind was blowing through the grounds, gently nudging the fresh-cut green grass.

Picnic-weather, save for the small gathering of black around a coffin. As Sakura took in the sight of mourners, she couldn't help but think that if fate was kind enough to recreate a day like this in the near future, she'd like her funeral to take place on a day exactly like this.

Ichi Hitaichi lived his seventy years as plainly but fully as he could. He liked straight and simple, no flair nor adventure, but he took what life offered. Ever since he was a child, he was quite aware that he wasn't meant to be a hero, celebrity, leader - nothing that minimally required greatness in people. That didn't mean that he grew with bitterness or resentment (those that most people his status were easily preys of). Instead, he shamelessly took everything in stride and with the amount of acceptance that only the most honest of people were capable of.

Peculiarly though, he was a massive romantic, believing that he wasn't destined for greatness, but he sure as well was destined to love. Yes, he was hopeless in that aspect. As soon as he had the chance, he proposed to his teenage love - a fireball of a woman who healed and gave and and made his world balanced and whole. Years after she said yes, without children, without power or fame, and even through a painful struggle against cancer, Ichi accepted everything and had treasured a full life with Miho Hitaichi.

His tearful widow recounted tender memories shared over fifty years of marriage. Though his departure was a long time coming and they talked endlessly of what her future would when the time came, Miho cannot bring herself to grief or accept it yet. That would come later, much much later. But one thing was for sure, as her husband had always said, he was thankful for time - time that he had spent with the one he fell in love with since the first day. He wasn't much of anything, but he was damn lucky that he found the love of his life with enough time to build a life with her. Miho felt the same, because not everybody got that chance.

Sakura closed her eyes and wrung her hands around an abused handkerchief at Miho's heartfelt eulogy of her husband. She had met the couple all of two times (and towards Ichi's tumultuous battle

against a winning illness), but the news of Ichi Hitaichi's demise had her begging her grumbling doctor to accompany her to the funeral and offer condolences to the bereaved. Only days before, she had spent time with the couple at the nursing home. Ichi-san had been smiling and doting on his wife. That very night, he was rushed to the hospital for the very last time. Today, he was being laid to rest. The fucking fragility and inevitability of life.

Perhaps it was morbid curiosity that she came- she hadn't attended a proper funeral in years. Given her current situation, she wondered if when she went, it would her funeral be similar to this. Of course not. There wouldn't be a tearful lover, nor friends who stayed in touch with the deceased for fifty years like Ichi. She had neither. Making a mental list of possible attendees to her own funeral, she took note of Haji (of course), Neji (of course), Takumi-san (the music store owner), Akane-san and the children (though she'd prefer the children did not come as it would me too upsetting), and Ino and Shikamaru (through probably not, Ino would be giving birth around that time).

Thinking of Naruto last, she honestly wasn't sure if he would show. Best case scenario, even if they *did* all attend, they wouldn't compare to the considerable crowd that showed up for good 'ole Ichi.

"What are you thinking about?" asked a low voice beside her. Haji looked good in a crisp black suit. Handsome as he was with his cheekbones and piercing eyes, he never did look comfortable in crowds. That he accompanied her to the funeral (or anywhere for that matter) meant how much of a friend Sakura had grown to be for the doctor. It was quite unfair to ask him to, but these days, she was always out of options.

They stood at the far end of the audience, Sakura loosely clasping hands around Haji's arm.

"How many people would show up to mine," she answered noncommittally with a smirk.

"Whoever told you you're good at being funny is a lying motherfucker," grunted Haji in his jerk-voice which he usually reserved for the nurses, Neji, and most recently Naruto.

"Oh I think he already knows that." She lightly chuckled. "But really, you have to think of these things."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do."

"But you don't have to."

"Yeah, I kinda do." Arguments between Sakura, a brilliant former medic and Haji, a doctor on the very top of his field, usually went like this - like they were a couple of five year-olds.

"Why don't you just tell me what really happened with that idiot the other day," Haji finally said.

A pregnant pause came between them as another one of Ichi's friends spoke to the crowd, telling the story of how Ichi proposed his wife.

"Nothing," she whispered before continuing. "And for your information, it is not that absurd to plan your own funeral."

"You are not changing the subject," he said with a roll of eyes.

"I am not changing the subject. I'm bringing back the subject formerly at hand."

"You are just trying to wear me out, aren't you?" Haji sighed, petitioning his head to the clouds while massaging the bridge of his nose.

"I am counting on that," she almost giggled, looking triumphantly at her companion. Letting it slide this time, he turned once again to the speaker in front.

" *We hadn't seen Ichi so happy. Yes, you could say that anyone engaged would be at their happiest and that it was normal. But for Ichi, that happiness and contentment lasted all the many years with Miho. That's what true love is. It isn't fleeting. It stays," a thoughtful voice narrated.*

Haji felt Sakura's grip on his arm tighten. She heaved a sigh and bowed her head, casting a long shadow on the grass.

Whatever happened with the idiot must be bad, well, worse than the situation already was. Again, the blond dunce was nowhere to be found. He hadn't seen him since he dropped off Sakura that soiree at the nursing home.

"He kissed me." Sakura said it so softly that he thought he imagined her words.

His jaw visibly clenched as he crinkled his nose in utter disgust.

Of course he did. That selfish fucker.

Uzumaki Naruto understood absolutely nothing. Haji is not a good judge of character on people he's met only a handful of times, but he *does* judge Naruto who he's met only a handful of times. That was because he's been with Sakura for as long as he did. Knowing Haruno Sakura was knowing Uzumaki Naruto and understanding how much of her pain was rooted in Uzumaki Naruto. But not even a small part of Sakura resented Naruto. She loved him freely and accepted everything that came with her sacrifice. Haji admired Sakura for it, but like Neji, he hated Naruto's guts. If Sakura didn't blame Naruto, then Haji would gladly do it for her.

Sakura had been through enough. And now he had the nerve to pile on her pain some more?

"Please tell me he's not with us anymore because you poured acid down his throat," he said in a hushed tone, trying to hide his fury.

She gave him a small smile and shook her head.

"What did you do?" he continued.

The smile faded from her face as she gazed up at Haji, letting go of his arm. She shook her head once again. "Nothin

g. I walked away."

"We haven't talked since then. I didn't see him this morning either."

Unsure of how to comment, he resigned to bumping his jaw to the top of head, assuring her of his presence. She resumed wringing the handkerchief she had been holding.

"I know it changes nothing, but how was I supposed to react? What am I supposed to do? I c-can't…" Haji could see so much turmoil in her eyes that it hurt.

"Ask Neji to kill him when he gets back. I'll help cover it up." He was blurting his answer without any thought. Snide remarks were his specialty, after all. Right in the middle of a sob and obviously in emotional hell, Sakura stopped and looked incredulously at her companion.

After a long breath, she did the last thing he thought she'd do. She laughed. Out loud. So much so that rows of people looked behind onto them with disapproving glares. Just when he thought he'd seen everything when it came to this girl.

What he did after made it worse, because he followed suit, guffawing at more people taking notice of them.

Sakura put her arms around her middle and leaned to his chest, trying to stifle her chuckles. He put one arm around her shoulder while he put his hand above his mouth. This girl never ceased to amaze him, from self-sacrifice, to illogical dispositions on health care

on said self, to unpredictable reactions to general daily events like funerals. You will never get bored with her.

Once they regained some semblance of composure, Sakura tried speaking again.

"Whoever told you you're good at being funny is a lying motherfucker," she said, echoing his earlier statement.

"On the contrary, you're still laughing. At a funeral, I might add."

"Touche."

"Uh huh."

"Disrespectful."

"Horribly disrespectful." Again, they laughed. Which earned them another set of glares and warnings from horrified old women in black.

Haji knew she didn't know how to deal yet -not regarding her own death, or an even more complicated matter - Naruto. And realizing his bias against the latter, Sakura wouldn't probably take whatever advice he gave regarding the subject. All he could do now is be there for her while she laughed uncontrollably at a funeral.

"Thank you so much coming here, Honey," Miho said with a smile, hugging Sakura and kissing her cheek.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," Sakura offered, her eyes downcast while holding the old woman's fragile hand. "Ichi-san was a good man. Obviously I didn't know him very well, but he was kind and seemed very loving," she added.

"You are so sweet, Sakura-chan." The older woman smiled, tucking a stray hair behind Sakura's ear. "Are you feeling well, though?" she

asked, casting a glance at the Sakura's profile.

Sakura wore a long sleeved black dress which accentuated her pale skin and dark circles under her eyes. The concern and genuine worry of Miho touched her heart.

"I'm feeling good today, Miho-san," Sakura replied with a smile. She knew that even with her withering body buried under full black, clothing, her sickly pallor her illness. "You don't have to worry about me. Dr. Yuy is with me," she added, gesturing to the tall man beside her.

"That's good to hear," Miho commented, approving of her companion.

"Naruto-kun seemed very out of it when I talked to him earlier. I thought it was about you. Fortunately, it's not," the old woman added.

That earned a surprised stare from Sakura. "He was here today?" interceded Haji.

"Yes, he was early and even gave us flowers. It's very thoughtful of both of you to have come. I know my husband annoyed you a lot but that was because he loved to mess with children," Miho explained. Then with a curt nod, she excused herself and returned to the crowd of people offering their condolences.

Sakura hadn't seen the blond shinobi since that night he kissed her and a million emotions passed by her all at once. Up until that point, she hoped that he respected the unspoken boundaries that they put up, at least what little of it remained. But in a spectacular fashion - the only he knew how to do things - he decided to cross them anyway and kiss his former best friend who he hadn't talked and cared for in years, while said best friend was dying from the sacrifice she made to save his life, *and* while technically still engaged to someone else.

It was just too damn complicated. Yes, after battling her instincts and against everything she lived for these years, she was a little grateful to have her best friend back. He was her sun, the reason she survived so long. She forgot how good it felt to feel his warmth at all, to find that balance back in her life, to see him smile just because he saw her. She loved him, but it wasn't just about love, if she could call it that. But there was that nagging feeling that clung to her ever since he came back - that voice that prevented her from being completely honest with him. *Was he there because of guilt? Did he pity her?* It was easy to come to that conclusion. Naruto was kind to a fault. And she wouldn't put it past him to stay with her because he had to. And if he did, would she still take it, the person that she was?

Back in the day, as a forlorn wide eyed romantic, she would have taken scraps of pity (of whatever) from Uchiha Sasuke if it meant he stayed with her. Was it the same with Naruto? She knew damn well that it wasn't. How she felt for everybody and everything else paled in comparison to what she felt for the blond. It was consuming and life-changing, and life-ending, apparently.

If there weren't monsters and seals and interfering clans, it would have been simpler. But they were here now, and no matter how pitiful she was in her current state, she would not settle with guilt and pity. And for the life of her she couldn't identify how much guilt and pity he had . That kiss was full of emotion that she couldn't handle or identify.

A gentle tap on her shoulder interrupted her thoughts as she looked up to Haji's annoyed face directed above her .

"Jackass is here," he muttered . She followed his gaze and landed on the blond man in black polo and pants walking towards them. "Always with the perfect timing," she heard her doctor comment.

Naruto had an unreadable expression on him, but there was no tension on his person as he approached the two. Sakura noticed the flowers on his hands as he stopped and gazed at her with a tilt of his head.

"Hi," he said with a soft smile.

It took Sakura a long breath before she acknowledged. Miho-san was right. Something was off with him. The way he looked at her was different somehow, like he was searching for something inside her with unfettered determination. It was disconcerting and made her feel off-balanced .

"Yeah. Um, Hi." The blond was now acknowledging Haji with a polite nod while the doctor stared at him and the flowers disgustingly.

"These aren't for you, you know" chiding the doctor, who snorted in response. He then turned to Sakura. "I'll take you home if you're ready," he said.

"I haven't seen you since…" she started, squinting her eyes questioningly.

"Errands again," he interrupted.

Though usually Naruto wore his heart on his sleeve, he was quite good with masking his emotions whenever he wanted. Sakura had been good at sensing it and knowing why, but it had been too long. She would have given an arm to know what he was thinking and where he went. Heaving a sigh and accepting the futility of such, she put hands on Haji's chest, effectively stopping the tirade he was obviously starting in protest of the blond's "intrusion" (as what he usually refers to Naruto's presence, basically).

"It's okay, Haji. You have to go back to the hospital, anyway," she smiled at her doctor.

The long-haired doctor closed his eyes in defeat, nodded and kissed Sakura's hairline in goodbye. "I'll send you the test results later," he said before leaving and glaring unabashedly at the blond intruder.

Sakura kept her eyes on Haji's retreating back, thankful that he didn't resist much. Her doctor had already went above and beyond for her.

She would be grateful for that until her last breath.

"He's mad I bailed, huh?" she heard Naruto comment.

"No," Sakura defended. "He's just being -"

"A dick?" Naruto offered.

She laughed. "No. Just Haji," she said, shrugging.

"If you guys hung out, I know you'd like each other," she commented.

"Well, I think he'd try to kill me the first chance he got," he grinned.

He looked at her again and she found her breath hitching. There it was again, that stare. It wasn't scary or threatening, just something that hooked her.

"I'm sorry for missing yesterday," he said.

"Stop. It's okay," she whispered. "You've stayed with me for a while now, you must have a lot of things -"

"No, it's not that," he interrupted again, shaking his head.

Biting her lip, Sakura waited for him to continue. But he didn't. Instead, he just looked down and took a slight step back with the flowers still in his hands. Her heart protestingly ached at the distance. Berating herself, she let the silence engulf them while silent murmurs were heard from the people who remained after the ceremony.

What did she expect? An apology for the kiss? How would that even go? Maybe Naruto finally realized the reality of the situation. When you have a ticking time bomb on your hands, you don't embrace it. You run far away and create as much distance as possible. She *was* the time bomb. If this was Naruto's way of creating distance, then she'll do what she does best and just power through the loss. It was bound to happen anyway.

"Sakura-chan," he said. Blue eyes pierced into her green ones. "Can we maybe stop somewhere first before we go? It's just nearby."

Offering no more explanation, he turned and walked when Sakura nodded her okay.

Naruto led them to a secluded clearing of the cemetery not far away. Sheltered by tall trees and the quiet, every step and crinkle of leaves could be heard.

She caught up to him kneeling and placing flowers on two tombstones. He stayed like that for a while with his back to her, bowing his head and placing his hands on the stones. The solemnity of his gesture had her stopping several steps from where he was, as if she wasn't supposed to be there.

"Sakura-chan, I'd like you to meet my mom and dad," he said as he finally straightened up and turned to her with a smile. Even with the distance, she could hear the blond's voice though it was almost whispering.

A lump in her throat formed as she recognized the epitaphs of Uzumaki Kushina and Namikaze Minato.

"A while back, Baa-chan and the elders told me everything about my parents. They showed me where they lived, where they were buried, even gave me what's left of their stuff," he said, stuffing his hands on his pants pocket. He rolled his lips and gazed at her, not minding that she wasn't coming nearer.

"I've been coming here since then. Introduced myself to them and everything. I figured, even though they can't talk to me, they can listen, you know?" he said as he smiled. "I know it's crazy to think that," he chuckled, scratching the back of his head.

"No, it's not," she defended, finally finding her voice. Sakura knew how much Naruto wanted to have a family. Being an orphan who had nothing and was given nothing since childhood, it must have been

overwhelming to learn for Naruto that his parents were heroes of Konoha - the Fourth Hokage and the last surviving Uzumaki. "They can hear you, And I am damn sure they are so proud of you and would give anything to be with you."

That earned her a sunny smile.

"I talk to them about everything - the war, Kyuubi, my progress as a shinobi." He paused and then continued, "You."

"How much you sacrificed for me, how selfish I've been to ignore that for years, how weak I am for ever believing you would betray me."

"Naruto -" she protested, but Naruto continued.

"When you love someone," he started again, looking straight at Sakura - focused and intense. "When you love someone with everything you have, you have faith in them. The sacrifice is easy to make because if it's a choice between your life or theirs, the answer is always going to be theirs. The story of my parents taught me that. They sacrificed their life for me, which means how I live my life and who I spend it is so much more precious now."

"Good," Sakura replied. "Then you know it's not worth throwing away."

He seemed to ignore her words as he started walking towards her. "I've been thinking a lot these days about you and us. And I realized that I've been looking at this the wrong way. All I've been doing is apologize to you for all the mistakes I've made. But there's one thing I haven't done which I should have since the very start," he said as he stopped just a breath away from her.

He raised his hands to tuck a wayward hair and brushed her bangs aside to make room on her forehead as he lowered his to touch hers. She almost flinched from the contact, but he didn't move away. He then took a deep breath, closed his eyes and whispered. "Thank you."

"Thank you for loving me that much," he breathed.

"I *swear* on my life and on my parents' graves that no matter what happens now, I will never leave you again," he said. "It doesn't matter whether you believe me or not, or whether you forgive me or not, because I love you that much, too."

It took everything for Sakura not to succumb the torrent of emotions that came pouring from his words. It didn't feel like the world stopped; it felt like it stopped existing altogether and her heart was breaking apart and being put together at the same time.

Tears prickled her eyes as he slightly pulled away but kept his hands on both her cheeks. Now that Naruto was much taller, she stood on tip toes and carefully held on to his arms for balance. She was trembling and couldn't breathe or swallow the lump in her throat. Overwhelmed by his gaze, she had to close her eyes as she couldn't do anything but bathe in his presence.

Soon, tears were freely flowing to her cheeks onto his hands. He didn't seem mind, though, carefully wiping them away with his thumb. How could fate be so cruel to her and Naruto? The timing was wrong every damn time. Their lives were strings of missed opportunities, untaken chances, and loves lost because it was never the right time. Especially not now, when she had all but given up on whatever salvation he thought she deserved. There *was* always a price to pay for a life - his life, and it was hers currently spiraling down the drain. It's a fucking bargain if you think about it. Why would the gods let him say all these things now?

This was not how she imagined this moment to be. She was expecting him to say goodbye, not this, whatever this was. In spite of all this, however, she could literally feel his heart at that moment, unwavering and insistent, blocking out all that was wrong. She bit her lip from the onslaught of his warmth. It was a losing battle, but she knew she had to cherish this moment, at least one more good memory to take to the grave, one chance for honesty.

"No," she said. That had Naruto opening his blue eyes and looking at her in question. His hold didn't lighten though.

"I love you more," she sobbed ungracefully. "So much more," she added, giving up and burying her head in his chest along with her hands to avoid his gaze.

To her mild surprise, he let out a small chuckle as he wrapped his arms around her shivering body. He bent his head to nuzzle her neck and inhaled her scent. This was what it felt like to be surrounded by him.

"So much more, huh?" he said softly. She turned from his chest and settled one cheek above his heartbeat to face him. Lightly tickled by his hair, she just nodded in response, finally offering the honesty he had been asking of her.

He smiled his bright smile which reminded her of old times. His gaze didn't veer away from her, as if taking inventory of every part of her face.

"I'm not quite sure about that," he finally said, playfully touching her nose with his.

She crinkled her nose at the contact. "You're a dork."

And then he just held her tight, his body shielding her from the gust of breeze in front of his parents' grave -admittedly an odd sight. But she didn't mind. She could've stayed in that moment until kingdom come.

Naruto lay on the couch, staring at the eggshell-colored ceiling of the Haruno's residence. Sakura was in her room resting while he settled in the couch against the background of a droning television. Some re-run of an action movie was playing. He and Sakura came home that day without any more heavy confessions. But somehow he

definitely relished the silence that seemed to change after they left the cemetery.

He rubbed his hands across his face and tried to rest himself, but his mind was still racing with a million thoughts. Surprisingly though, his heart felt lighter. He smiled as he remembered Sakura's words earlier. She must have probably thought that with his absence after she walked away from the night he kissed her, he was finally letting her go. Sakura had told him over and over again how nothing could stop her from her impending death and that she had accepted it, but he saw something in her eyes earlier that he hadn't seen before - hope.

He knew that things didn't exist in a vacuum, that things were still as complicated and admittedly bleak. She still had a death sentence to fight, there were still no word from Kakashi and Sasuke for a possible cure. He still had to uncover whatever scheme the Hyuuga clan had and why it involved Sakura. Hell, Tsunade-baachan was even deathly silent on the issue. On top that, he still hadn't talked to Hinata.

But whatever his fear was regarding the shitstorm that was coming, it was overwhelmed by the truth that he finally accepted just days ago - he loved her. Even after all these years, after everything that happened, however much of a dick he was, and even though he would sound hypocritical to other people to admit it now, that was the truth. He loved her, not again, still. He loved her still. Under extreme pain years ago, he had buried that feeling deep down when eventually, he couldn't even unearth it. But when he finally let go of all the bullshit, it was all that remained. And for damn sure, he's not letting her go without a fight (which was why he had to leave her yesterday, but that was another story).

What mattered now was that he finally told her and finally made her see it. Nothing was for certain, except for what he felt for her. She wasn't the only one willing to make a sacrifice.

He sat up straight as he sensed movement and shifted his gaze from the television (he wasn't really paying attention) to Sakura leaning on her bedroom's door frame, barefoot and wearing a blanket around her pajama-clad body.

"Hey, you feeling okay?" he asked with concern, taking inventory of her person. Thankfully, she was breathing normally and had enough color on her face.

She smiled and shook her head as she shifted her weight on her right foot. It looked like she was looking around the room for nothing in particular.

"You need anything?" Naruto asked.

He watched her furrow her brows and crinkle her nose, opening her mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

"Sakura-chan?" He was starting to get worried now. He was about to stand up to go to her when she gestured for him to sit back down.

"I'm… I'm cold." She whispered it so lowly that if not for his shinobi ears, the blond wouldn't have heard her words. "I don't know… Maybe I could… You know…" she stuttered in gaps, tightening her grip on the blanket.

"Nevermind, it's stupid," she said when he realized he hadn't said anything and turned around.

"Wait, Sakura-chan." In a blur, he was suddenly behind the pink-haired girl, gently turning her around.

Clearly, she was embarrassed of what she wanted, but it made Naruto quite happy that she was starting to lean on him bit by bit. Thankfully, she had stopped pushing him away and allowing herself to need her. And for damn well, he'd be anything he needed her to be - friend, confidant, co-conspirator, even mattress or pillow. To be honest, he liked that she could still manage a small blush. It gave

color to her perpetually sickly white skin. Underneath though, he felt her slightly trembling. She really was cold.

Wanting to alleviate her embarrassed state, he asked, "You want to hang with me on the couch?"

She turned around and nodded into his left arm without meeting his eyes.

"Come here," he urged gently as he led her to the couch.

Laying on the couch first, he opened his arms in invitation. He sucked in a deep breath as slowly she arranged herself, laying her head on his chest with her hands beneath her chin while her legs closed in on one of his calves. Her small waist lodged carefully against his hips while her long pink hair fanned across his chest. They both sighed deeply at the contact. Her body temperature was too low, but he didn't flinch, instead tried to give her as much warmth as he could. He lightly caressed his hands up and down her back while she snuggled more comfortably on top of him, like a cat resting at its favorite bed. There was nothing sexual about it, at the very least, it was safe and comfortable. It was about needing a simple touch and reassuring her of his presence. She weighed like nothing at all.

"Thank you," he heard her mumble on his chest. "You feel good." He felt her inhaling deeply.

She felt good to him, too, to be honest. It felt the same like back before he left her years ago. He had loved holding her and bathing in her smell and all that's Sakura-chan. It was a giddy feeling and made him feel whole.

Silly guy that he was, he grinned towards the top of her head. "Now, now, Sakura-chan. Don't tempt a man like that. Ow! Ow! Hey stop pinching. No fair." He pretended to squirm, chuckling, as Sakura buried herself more on his chest while trying to pinch him. Her bony fingers could barely exert force. "Okay, okay, I'll stop," he relented

but tightened his grip on her blanket to surround her. He couldn't see, but by now, she must have been madly blushing. She grunted her annoyance but snuggled impossibly closer.

They let the low volume of the television fill the silence in the living room for a while. She stayed immaculately still. Hopefully, he'd lulled her to sleep.

"You're gonna be okay, honey. I promise," he whispered. He didn't intend for her to hear it, but the change in her breathing told him that she had.

"Stop promising things." Her voice was muffled by his shirt which she gripped onto like a lifeline.

"Why not?"

"Because you know!"

"Actually I don't know."

"Oh you know."

"No, I don't."

"Please, Naruto. That's enough for today," she moaned and nuzzled his neck. Her breath was staggered and tired while her hair fanned out even more across his torso, some of it finding its way underneath his shirt. There was something so intimate with her gesture that Naruto's response had died in his lips. It was his turn to blush. Damn it, she could floor him with just that. He sighed and turned his head to the television.

He couldn't help but think that if the world had just let them be together, things would be simple. They would be married by now (if things had gone right, he would have asked her to marry him the moment they were old enough) and the only things they'd be arguing about would be who would made dinner that night or where they'd go

for date night. But now, even though they're shutting the world out and she was having a good day, reality will start catching up to them. He shook the thoughts out of his head and resigned to cherishing these precious moments with her. He chose her and all that she came with. That's all that will ever matter.

To be continued.

Read and review. All my love.

Touch

Chapter 22: Touch

Disclaimer: Don't own Naruto. Who would want to at this point?

It's been years since I've updated. But I'm not giving up. Imma finish this so hold on tight!

Chapter 22: Touch

I am good, I am grounded

I can keep my head around it

I keep feeling smaller and smaller

I need my girl

The cool water felt good on his face. He exhaled as droplets fell from his chin, creating a series of swirls on the water in the bathroom sink.

Blue eyes stared at Naruto from the bathroom mirror. They were steady and familiar and it reminded him of the boy he once had been. Good, he thought to himself. The more of him he recovered from before, the better.

Sakura had spent the night in his arms and it was the best night he had in years. Waking up to her peaceful face was the best part, knowing that even for a night, she managed to sleep soundly with him.

The sound of rustling from the living room brought him back from his thoughts. Haji had stopped by that morning to check up on Sakura. He decided to take his time with his morning routine and he give

both patient and doctor their privacy. He was sure he'd never understand Sakura and Haji's relationship, but he knew she was very fond of him. He promised himself not to cause any more trouble for her, so he made sure he'd give the irritated doctor a wide breadth this time. After all, Sakura wasn't going anywhere.

With a heaving sigh, he poked behind the medical cabinet for his razor and bottle of shaving cream. Better get rid of those stubble while he was at it.

Neck lathered in white substance and right hand poised with the razor, he was about to get to work when a voice came.

"Hey," someone whispered.

Naruto turned to the owner of the voice. It was Sakura gently leaning on the bathroom door with a warm smile, arms crossed across her chest.

"Sakura-chan! Sorry, was I taking too long?" He chuckled while washing his hands.

She shook her head in reply. "Haji just left." She followed the statement with a smile and nothing more. She looked well with color in her cheeks, but somehow the calm exuberance she tried to show didn't reach her eyes.

Caught surprised, Naruto stood there, stiff and neck drooling with shaving cream.

"Is something wrong?"

She shook her head again. Pushing off the door, the pink haired girl walked towards him.

"You look funny," she said, pointing at his face.

"Oh this? Well, you know," he started in reply, but didn't know what else to say. He was a man, and he liked his face clean, except of

course, his whiskers which he couldn't do anything about. He tried to grow facial hair on purpose for a mission once, and it did not look well on him, not one bit. "Sakura-chan are you sure - " he started.

"Can I help?' she asked, not bothering to let him finish his statement.

"Uuh." Caught off guard once again, he didn't notice how she had already taken the razor from him with her hand and the other on his shoulder, pushing him with little force to sit down. Sitting in the tall bathroom stool, his face was level with hers. There wasn't much distance between them, enough that his cheeks could feel every breath she took. She looked at him with a strange expression, her eyes looking into his like looking for something. He wondered what she saw, not bothering that with her proximity to him, droplets of shaving cream were dripping on his shirt, almost touching hers.

"Don't worry, I know how to do it," she whispered, and again, he noticed that there was strain in her eyes.

The slender girl got on with her task gently, turning his head and smoothing his chin, throat, and one side of his face as she did so. His breath laboured at her attention. She did the same on the other side, carefully sliding the razor down, meticulously making sure that no hair was left. She was impossibly close to him again like she was last night, and it was all he could do not to place his arms around her. To protect her small and fragile body until all the sickness left her. No one had done this to him and it was surprisingly overwhelming. It was distracting. And she was doing it on purpose.

"You want to tell me what's wrong?" He closed his eyes as she felt her minty breath on his jaw.

"What's wrong is that you'll bleed if you talk," she whispered on his ear with a chuckle while dipping the razor in water and resuming her task.

"I'll risk it." He tried to follow her eyes but was his head was promptly leaned back as Sakura returned to her task.

"Sakura-chaaaan…" he warned, ignoring the fact that she was shaving dangerously near his jugular. He grunted in annoyance, but before he can get in a word, she slowly brought his chin down so she could look at him.

Her eyes were pleading, as if asking him to let her have this moment of silence, of delaying the inevitable. "Let me," she said. He finally relented as he moved his hand to the side of her neck, catching pink hair in the process, while his thumb caressed her slender jaw. She closed her eyes and leaned into his hand and just let her go on with her task, not bothered that his hand stayed on her waist.

When she was done, she turned the faucet and soaked her hands while he washed his clean-shaven face. He stayed silent as she turned to him, holding a towel and gently patting his whiskered cheeks, his jaw, his neck.

She smiled a small smile, looking proud of her work on his face, surveying every part with cold and soft hands, then moving down to his neck and stopping at his chest as if feeling his heartbeat. As nice as it was to have her touching him, Naruto's heart was constricting, anxious of what she was about to say. He gently encircled her small waist with his arms, bringing her a tiny inch closer to his chest. She sighed and moved her hands behind his neck, all the while touching his skin.

It was only just yesterday that they admitted the truth to each other. It shouldn't make sense that this type of intimacy should grow between them overnight. But to him, it made sense, like it made sense to breathe. It seemed that the same was for her too. Once he touched her, he couldn't stop, like he was making up for lost time. Or starting over. His touch made her warm, at least while he was connected to her skin. And he never wanted to stop.

He tilted his head as her fingers played at the nape of his neck. How had he survived these years without her? He was hers. God, he was hers so much that it hurts.

"It's nothing new really," she sighed quietly like she was just commenting at the weather. She gazed at him with the side of her lips upturned.

His brows furrowed, waiting for her to continue. "It hasn't slowed down. All the tests, all the meds, they're not slowing it down," she finished with a bitter laugh. He paused for a long time to ponder her words, schooling his expression into a neutral one. The more Sakura opened up to him, the more he was privy to the depth of her what was happening to her. What pained her was seeing him in pain because of her. He didn't want her to see that anymore. Everything was about her.

It was messed up. The more honesty she showed, the more he hid his guilt and pain more. All he wanted now was to make her feel his love that had always been there. Their bubble was about to burst, reality was creeping in. It was only yesterday that they finally accepted each other for all the fuck ups, all the betrayal, all the hurt that they suffered because and for each other. They had spent all of one night catching up to each other's feelings, and now, just the morning after, they were supposed to just let each other go? How could one night ever be enough?

"Haji, he wants me to go back to staying at the hospital. He wants me to - ". She tried to unwrap her hands from his neck when he stopped her, placing them on both his shoulders.

Hell fucking no. His own hands placed themselves on her waist again, this time with one travelling under her open robe and slowly feeling under the thin material of her night shirt. He traced every inch of her back continuing upwards and not letting up until it reached the scars of her back, uncomfortably lifting her shirt as far as it would go. He felt her bones, caressed her, like his fingers were placing butterfly kisses on the rough and burned skin there. It was a painful contrast to the rest of her body's white pallor. Her breath hitched like his did earlier and her fingers dug gently on his shoulders, but she didn't make any move to stop him even when he stood up and placed his lips gently on her shoulder, nudging the strap of her shirt down. He

placed gently placed soft kisses one by one, half a second per piece until he reached her jaw as one hand cradled the back of her neck. He brought her on her tiptoes when he moved his hands again to her front, carefully taking inventory of her stomach, each rib and feeling her quickened breath. One hand held her steadfastly to him while the other went up to feel the bone in the middle of her chest, up again to her neck, joining his other hand and lips. He slowly lifted her head so he can gaze down to those deep green eyes of hers.

He did this slowly, softly until her cheeks were beet red from his touches. The redness reached her neck until it disappeared beneath her shirt. Good, that was a better color on her. She looked ungodly sick, but when he touched her, closer and closer, it felt like she was nearer to becoming more human.

"You feel fine to me. You're warm. You feel good," he whispered huskily. It was his turn to distract her. She looked up at him, her eyes watering and brows furred as if she was in pain which he soothed by running his lips across her forehead and then moving down to her dainty nose. He knew she felt his breath on her cheeks.

"You're distracting me," she whined, pushing him back a little bit, but he didn't budge an inch. It was working.

"You're fine. Do I make you feel better?" he whispered on her cheek. He wished he was.

"Yes, yes you do," she said as if was complaining. "Maybe Haji's right. About the hospital," she said, finally catching her balance and ignoring his actions. "But I - "

"But," he interrupted, lifting the bottom of her chin with a finger. "You want to stay with me." It took her a full minute to answer.

"I want to stay with you," holding on to him and pulling on to the back of his shirt that it hurt. "I know now what I've been missing and yesterday when you said… I believe it… Suddenly, I'm not alone, and I need… I need." There were her tears again. This was the cost

of her letting him in. This was the honesty he was asking for - that she was scared of loving him.

"But I can't ask you to… I don't want to…" She continued, shook her head, and sobbed until she couldn't finish.

All of it were strings of unfinished sentences, but he understood what she wanted. Inside he was falling apart too. His gentle and beautiful girl in constant pain and in constant struggle because of him. His girl on the verge of death because of him, for him. But he couldn't show her that anymore - that he blamed himself - because it would break her more. Even now, she was more scared of hurting him than she was of dying.

"You know what you need, Sakura-chan?" he said, gently cradling her head.

"Yes." She wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

"You can have it," he said, taking her hand to place it on his chest once more.

"What if I need everything?" she said, laughing bitterly.

His face turned serious and determined. "Then take it. All of it."

"So where do you wanna go?" he asked, swinging their laced fingers. They've just left her house and were strolling past the children's park.

"You asked me on a date and you don't even know where to go?" she teased, tugging up her dark green sweater around her with her free hand.

Naruto felt like his world was turned upside down, suddenly tilted when Sakura came back to his life. Now when they were trying to heal, it felt even more and more in disarray but in a good way. But it

was taking its toll. He could only imagine what it would be like with Sakura.

So just to feel normal, he had asked her for what felt like a long overdue date. She was feeling okay, and the weather was okay, so today was as good as any day.

He smiled at her teasing. "Well how about this, you pick the first one, and then I'll pick the next one," he mused. He tucked a stray hair behind an ear.

"I'm the first one cause you don't know where to go, do you?" she laughed. He didn't think she would laugh at him again.

"You know me so well, Sakura-chan," he said, pulling her along.

She sighed and said, "Fine, fine. I know where to go."

He recognized this place, the one where they came to pick up Sakura the first time, where Neji had honestly, intentionally tried to kill him and Sasuke. It was a music store. He remembered something about Sakura's father being a music man. He assumed the first time that they were there before just buying music records.

He looked around the multitude of guitars, vinyls, and monochords while Sakura was hugged an elderly man whom she called Takumi.

"And who is this young man?" he asked.

"This is Naruto," she gestured to him.

"Ah," the man nodded, curiously eyeing the way the pink-haired woman reached for his hand.

"You take good care of her?" he said. The elderly man sized him up like a stern father letting his daughter out on a date for the first time.

"Always, Sir," Naruto replied with a salute while putting his arm around Sakura's shoulder while she smiled onto his shoulder.

It looked like Takumi-san approved as he watched Sakura being close to him. He nodded as he went on to tend to his store.

"Are we buying something?" Naruto asked, arm still around the pink-haired woman.

"Nope," she smiled, pulling him towards a white grand piano. She stroked the cover carefully like it was precious. She smiled at him as she started to lift the cover. He was close to her in a second as he helped her. He looked at her questioningly.

"You play?" he asked in silent wonder. She seemed to be in deep thought before she answered. "I guess I do," she said with a smirk.

"Takumi-san lets me play. He and dad were friends."

"Really?" She just nodded.

"Awesome," he exclaimed. He had never heard her play. She took her seat carefully and deciding to stay close to her, he sat too but straddled the seat, his front facing her side. "You'll play for me?" he said excitedly like a boy. She started tapping the keys one by one, each tone different from the other.

"You have to pay up first though" she said, reaching out her hand, intent on teasing. He didn't reach for change though, instead, she took her upturned palm and kissed it. That got her blushing as she said "Not much of a fee." That got her a wide green.

She took a breath, straightened her, and closed her eyes. She started by stroking two keys repeatedly, while her other hand following suit on white keys. The pace was slow and steady as she established her melody. He felt like his heart was ready to burst out of his ribcage with joy, and then she started singing.

I will love you til the end

There's no need to pretend

That you are the one

Who has sailed my heart

To the ocean blue

I hoped it would be you

In all their genin days, Naruto had only heard Sakura hum a tune now and then, but he had never heard her sing a full song, much play the piano while doing so. He was completely captivated as she continued, his own blue eyes focused on her relaxed face.

When I'm dead and gone

I know I will live on

Cause you've captured me

And so I am released

To the ocean blue

I hoped it would be you

To the ocean blue

I hoped it would be you

She looked at him with a smile, her words vulnerable and melancholic, but letting him in all the same. Her words were poetry and her music simple and gentle.

Now this chapter's closed

So the story goes

But I have more to say

I'll see you there one day

In the ocean blue

I knew it would be you

The lump in his throat formed with the last words and her strokes faded. She completely stopped, paused for a second, and touched her fingers like she hasn't used them for a long time. "I'm not that good," she chuckled, apparently not noticing the blond's breathing has changed. When she did, she looked at him, questioning his expression.

It seemed like he wasn't aware of what he was doing as he reached out to her with trembling fingers, gently pulling her closer as he leaned in and kissed her lips softly. He felt her take a breath as turned sideways and returned the kiss this time, moving her lips with his and gently stroking his jaw as he massaged the back of her head. He was whole, finally whole as her soft lashes caressed his face. His sweet girl felt like she didn't want to let him go, still following his lead on their kiss. When they finally parted, he was breathless and his eyes were misty and full of emotion. She had color on her face once again and he was looking at her like she was his everything. And she was.

"I lo… I love you, Sakura," he croaked out, his face impossibly close to hers. His confession was not suave or sexy like he wanted, but it earned him the best smile that she has given him so far. It's not like he was asking for her to say it back, but as if reading his mind, she said "My song kind of said it for me." She laughed and leaned into him once more.

Business was unusually slow today, but Mizuno Hayate wasn't bored. It maybe because it was too hot for ramen anyway. He was rather thankful that there wasn't much of a lunch rush so his wife wouldn't strain herself. Now, if she wasn't so bored herself, then today would be perfect.

His wife, Ayame, already showing a little bump on her midsection, was restless and couldn't be bothered to take some rest whenever she and her husband manned their succesful ramen shop. They could easily hire more help to run the restaurant, but she and her father believed and insisted on personally taking care of business.

Hayate loved that about Ayame. He loved working with her, and with his father-in-law out of the village for some business, they can more than manage the shop. Finishing up on serving one of only two occupied tables, he deposited his tray and walked towards his wife who was busy arranging and rearranging the cutlery and bowls on the counter.

"Sit down, woman," he teased as he swifly took a bowl from her hand and deposited it where it was previously. Kissing her on top of her little head, he guided her to man the counter where there was a perfectly comfortable stool.

"You spoil me," she whined, as she gave up and placed her chin on one palm.

"Just doing my job, love," he chuckled as he checked the broth and noodles and the multitude of toppings ready to be served for the next customer.

"Come on, Sakura-chan!"

Just as he went to clean the counter, Ayame perked up with a gasp and stood from her stool with a smile. She practically skipped towards the entrance and conversed with the voices outside.

He would have followed but soon enough, his wife was showing a blond and his companion inside and to a booth.

"Come in, come in, Naruto-kun," his wife said, beaming.

Said blond followed, his hand linked with a pale-faced woman with pink hair which he recognized from before. She was the woman who was there during that wedding day. All he knew was that the wedding didn't happen and it was supposed to be all dramatic, but his wife and his father-in-law just said to let it lie. All of them haven't seen Naruto, arguably their most frequent customer, in the shop since.

"Honey, come here! Come say hi," Ayame beckoned to him. Getting menus and straightening his apron, he approached the booth, where Naruto and the pink-haired woman settled across each other.

"Naruto-san, how nice to see you here today," Hayate reached out to shake the blond's hand who shook his in acknowledgement.

"Hayate. Feels like a long time, ne? Ayame-neechan looks well with your baby! Oh, and I want to introduce you to Sakura-chan," he said, motioning to the girl with a small smile and reaching for her hand.

"Hi," she said with a little wave.

"Sakura-san? That's your name! You're the same Miss from before, aren't you?" he asked. Like the last time, the girl was wearing too many clothes which could be uncomfortable with the heat. She looked way thinner too compared to when he last saw her.

When Sakura nodded, Ayame chimed in. "You've met Sakura-chan?" Naruto's brows raised in question too.

"Yes, I went here once with some old coupons and he was gracious enough to indulge me," she explained, pulling on her sleeves, and smiling at the blond across her who seemed to ask more questions but decided not to speak.

"Oh no, please, you paid for it anyway," he assured, blushing at the compliment of the young woman.

"And don't worry, both of your orders are on the house today," Ayame announced, pulling her husband in a side-hug.

"Oh no, Ayame-neechan, I'm paying today. It wouldn't be a proper date if I didn't," Naruto replied, gazing at Sakura who just rolled his eyes at his teasing.

Hayate felt his wife clench the shirt on his waist while blinking too fast.

As soon as Naruto and Sakura were served their orders, he pulled his wife out of earshot and tried to soothe her trembling lips. Ayame's hormones go haywire now and then due to the pregnancy, but somehow this was different.

"They know each other?" he asked, wondering what was the problem as he looked on to the couple quietly eating their meal, well, Naruto more than Sakura.

"They were teammates. He was in love with her. They had a falling out around the time we met. That's why you never saw her with him. It's a long story, really," she said, wiping her eyes with a tissue that he handed her.

Ayame and his father-in-law always had a special spot for Uzumakin Naruto. They had known him practically his entire life. He only ever knew that Naruto was with Hyuga Hinata since they met. It wasn't his business to pry, but for the first time, he saw something in Naruto's eyes that he had never seen in him before - pure love.

"But they're back together now. So what's the problem, little girl?" he cooed. He and Ayame being together wasn't always smooth sailing. They had broken up before eventually getting married. Love was difficult and he wasn't going to judge anyone's choice on whom to love, whether for the first time or the millionth time.

At his question, Ayame's tears came faster. "She's really sick." Dying, was her unheard explanation. She sobbed, burying her face in his chest. As he rubbed his wife's back and felt his child in her tummy, he looked again to the couple they had been talking about. The blond was quietly whispering something to the young woman which had her smiling gleefully. He soothed Ayame's hormonal sobs as best as he could, telling her that everything was okay.

"Now ramen's more like it!"

He heard someone yell as two drunken men stumbled inside the shop. One was swaying on his feet while his friend didn't fare any better. Jeezus, it was only two hours past noon. The nearest bars haven't even opened yet, which meant that these were bums were professional drunks. Their alcoholic stink immediately wafted in the air.

Sitting his wife down on her former stool, he gave her an assuring smile as he approached the two men to take their orders. They had perched themselves merely two tables from Naruto and Sakura, and one, who looked more drunk than his companion, seemed to recognize the blond. He was considered as the village hero after all and his very public non-wedding of the decade must have people gossiping.

"Izzat Uzumaki Naruto?" the black-haired man drawled loudly to his companion as he slumped in his chair.

"Looks like it," his friend sneered, while spitting on the ground.

Hayate noticed Naruto visibly stiffen while Sakura reached across the table to touch his knuckles with a relaxed smile.

That's when Hayate realized that they weren't in awe of the blond hero. They were looking down on him. Some neanderthals were still seeing him as a demon-child, not the ninja who saved the village

more times than one can count. They weren't being subtle with their conversation either.

"May I get your order?" Hayate interrupted, miffed by the drunken idiots.

Asshole number one had the balls to crane his neck to take a good look at the young woman who was still holding Naruto's hand. She looked so fragile and small. "Waittaminute, wasn't he supp'sed to be shacking up with a Hyuga? That ain't her," he gestured to his chest with two hands as if holding melons. "If you know what I mean". Hayate heard chopsticks being placed back on the table.

"Definitely not." Asshole number two joined him in laughter. Hayate gritted his teeth and repeated his question again to change the subject.

"Sirs, if you're not going to order then please take your conversation somewhere else."

He was ignored.

"Well he moved on fast. This new one doesn't look any good. But whatever gets you off, I guess." That was asshole one.

"Don't mind them, okay?" Hayate heard Sakura whisper to his side. Even with his back to them, he could feel the anger emanating from Naruto.

"Okay, I'm gonna have to ask you to leave the shop. I suggest you walk it off and sober up, gentlemen," he said, gesturing the men outside.

"Hey, what's your problem? We're gonna order, okay?" said Asshole number two.

Apparently Asshole one didn't hear a single word from Hayate as he was still leering at Sakura. Licking his lips and angling his body to

the pink-haired, he said "I could make that work though. Tap that body. Bend it over and uph-."

It all happened so fast. Before Hayate could even clench his fist to punch the man in front of him for his indecency, the sound of chairs crashing reached his ear, along with the gasp of his wife and Sakura.

In a flash, Naruto was out of his seat, standing with one hand clenched around Asshole one's neck and raised him above his head. Surprised, Asshole two stupidly lunged at the blond. He was easily snatched by his neck as well by Naruto's other hand. The scene was silent except for the two men's gagging noises and useless clawing at the blond's arms. Naruto didn't even look like he was trying, not even an ounce of chakra being let out of his body. Hayate had never seen Naruto in action before, had only heard about his fights from others, but at that point, he knew that he was witness to only the slightest of the blond's strength.

Clearly sensing danger, the last few customers immediately ran out.

Hayate, Ayame, and Sakura both gasped his name at the same time, but they were drowned out as Naruto growled a sound that no human should be capable of, close to crushing the windpipes of his captives.

"You motherfuckers ever say one word again and I'll skin you alive, rip young tongues out through your throats and feed them to you. Over and over," he snarled, eyes red and clearly intent on making good on his promise.

Hayate saw Sakura slowly walking towards the blond and he almost stopped her, but she shook her head.

"Hey, Naruto," she whispered, closing in on the blond who haven't moved, clearly not being strained from holding two grown men above his head. They were gasping for air, with Asshole two already near passing out. "Naruto, look at me," she said once more, reaching out to him from his side.

Slowly, his head turned to the pink-haired woman. From where Hayate stood, it looked like his eyes were red and growling still

"Who held me in his arms last night and this morning, hmm?" she murmured, touching his whisker with one finger. "Focus on me. I need you."

It seemed like he didn't hear her. But with a pained expression towards his girl, Naruto looked like he was about to put the men down. Instead with a flex of both arms, he threw them so far they were out crashing on the street in a second.

He moved to follow them but Sakura blocked his way, almost colliding with his chest. This slender woman was stopping this hulk of a man on his path. "Not worth it," she said with a small smile while framing his face with her hands, urging him to look at her.

As Sakura calmed the blond down with soothing touches, Hayate, seething with his own anger, checked to see that his Ayame was okay and just a little shaken before taking two bowls of ramen, stalking outside where the men were still gasping for air, and promptly dumping the hot bowls on their heads. They didn't even flinch, visibly fearing for their lives.

"And don't you dare come back!" he yelled.

As he went back inside, he found Naruto trembling as he wrapped his arms around Sakura's waist and back, pulling her closer and nuzzling the side of her neck. "Sorry," he said as he buried his face on her collarbone.

"Ssssh,"she cooed, rubbing his back and hugging him.

Hayate sighed as he leaned on the counter, stroking his wife's cheek and giving the unlikely couple a little privacy. "I think I'm gonna need to take up some martial arts classes," he said to himself.

It's like the spell had been broken. As she asked to go to the ninja academy, pulling his hand all the way, he didn't speak a word. He just let her guide him.

Not when she pushed open the gate, not when she asked him to sit on his swing, he wouldn't say anything. She left him for a bit to take something from the hollow of the tree behind him. Her hand waded through the dirt as she searched for her prize. Once she felt the hard box, she sighed gratefully, taking it out. She hoped it was still there. In her anguish three years, she decided to just leave this treasure near his swing. Where somehow, it could be close to a part of him.

She took a deep breath as she walked towards the man who haven't even moved a muscle. He didn't even notice that she was holding his box behind her back.

He slumped with his head down, cradled between forearms while his fingers gripped his hair. Damn it. They had been doing so good today. When she played the piano for him, when he brought her to eat ramen like old days, it felt like for the first time, things were easy - that things weren't so fucked up. It was the closest that they had come to normalcy, to just being stupidly in love. But those jerks had to come in and ruin his day.

Clearly, what happened after had affected him more than it did her.

"Not much of a date if you're not in it at the end," she whispered teasingly, trying to coax him out of his stupor.

He exhaled with a heavy sigh, and for the first time, lifted up his head to look up at her, nostrils flaring. He looked like he was in so much pain and very angry.

"You said they've called you worse," he growled with gritting teeth.

Sakura swallowed as she processed his words. In trying to calm him earlier that day before he went and killed those two men dead, she had stupidly said that. Not that it was a lie, people tended to talk

around her. On the rare occasions that she was out of her house and people recognized her, without Neji or Haji's protection, they would whisper harsh words - *weak, loser, addict, user, whore* - the last one she assumed was because it looked like she did a 180 between Sasuke and Naruto. It hurt at first, but just like everything else, it didn't matter.

"That they've treated you worse," he continued as he put two and two together. That pain in his face was visible again, the one she suspected was there all along that he had tried to hide. He had guilt written all over his face combined with anger and frustration.

"Naruto, it doesn't matter - "

"It does matter," he interrupted frustratingly.

"Why?"

"Because I couldn't protect you then!" he yelled, once again slumping and bowing his head down. "Fuck!"

Even in the past, Naruto had been fiercely protective of her. But it had been a while since she had seen him fight For her. He had been nothing but gently with her since he came back to her. It was a bit jarring, but she had always accepted his dark side. Now, if he can only get out of this funk.

Sakura looked up at the sky and counted to ten. Telling Naruto that it didn't hurt was never going to work.

" *He* wants to protect you too," he said, too silent that she didn't even hear. "That's why at the ramen place…" His voice was trembling. They hadn't discussed the demon fox in a long time. All she remembered about him was that one time they met in Naruto's mind, how they agreed that he would save him. "He's beating me up for not being able to - " he couldn't continue as her fingers pulled his chin up so he could look at her once again.

"I thought you loved me," she said. His eyes widened at her words.

"I do. You know I do," he defended, standing up from the swing and towering over her. She didn't flinch as she saw his eyes dangerously framed in red. But she knew he was trying to reign the fox in.

"Then trust me when I say that it doesn't matter," she said. He was shaking his head again, like he didn't want to hear her.

"All those things, they did hurt. But as I've told you, it was all worth it." She paused, looking at Naruto's disbelieving expression. Now it was her turn to be in pain. "You know why?"

"Because it led me here to you. And I know it's hypocritical. But I don't care." She had to stop to take a breath so she wouldn't melt into a puddle of tears. "I don't care that I'm breaking all my promises I've made to myself before to not fight and just let it end. I don't care if there's not much time left. I don't care." It was the truth. She didn't anymore.

"It's worth it to be here with you, just like I hope it's worth it for you too." She bit her chapped lips, heaved a sigh and searched his face for any indication that he even listened to her.

Naruto's face slowly schooled into a neutral expression. He breathed deeply and moved closer to her. She caressed his forearms as she did so.

"I've made you cry again." He said more to himself, than to her. His eyes was fully blue this time. He kissed her forehead and leaned down to murmur on her ear. "Of course it's worth it for me," he answered. "It's always going to be worth it if it's you." He kissed the side of her mouth, her nose, her temple.

She sniffled and smiled, a bit tickled by the blond's hair. "Good." He seemed to let it go this time for the meantime and she would take the win.

"Come sit. I'll push you." With a tired smile, but a smile nonetheless, he gestured to the swing, lacing her fingers with hers. She was about to follow him when she remembered something.

"Wait, wait. I got you something," she said excitedly, forgetting the surge of emotions from before and clutching the package behind her back.

"Close your eyes," she told him. It wasn't his birthday, but what the hell.

He eyed her curiously, but after a beat, he did as she asked. Caressing his face, and after making sure that he wasn't peeking, she brought a box in front of her, dusting off dirt and grime accumulated through the years.

"Okay, open them!" When he did, he found a brown rectangular box in her hands, fingers sweeping off some remaining dirt.

He carefully took it from her and opened it. Inside was an old note, dated years ago on his birthday. It said " *To everyone's hero as well as mine. Happy birthday, Naruto! Love, Sakura"* . It was the gift that she was supposed to give him after the war, assuming that they lived through it. And they did.

He looked at her questioningly as she motioned for him to look what was inside. Beneath a thin white paper was a necklace. A thin black string held an emerald pendant with obvious cracks in between the tiny pieces. Said pieces were held together by lighter shards of amber. It formed part the necklace that Tsunade gifted him which he thought was destroyed during his fight with Pein.

She had painstakingly looked around in the rubble to find the shards as she grappled with the fact that she was, indeed, in fact with her blond best friend. She was dead confused and scared because she knows how she didn't deserve him. Hinata did - the kind and pure-hearted girl who had loved him from the start. But either way, she

knew she could give him that gift, put together some part of him that broke.

Feeling satisfied with Naruto's shocked reaction, Sakura smiled. "I found them where it broke. Took me a while to fix it. I used my parent's charm to mold the pieces. I don't think it works anymore though. But it looks decent enough to umph - " her words and air were knocked out of her as for what seemed like the millionth time that day, Naruto held her too tight in his arms. But she welcomed it. He felt so real and his breath was hitching as if he ran a thousand mile marathon. He cradled her, his fingers tangling in her hair as she settled on his chest, right above his strong heartbeat. Maybe she didn't deserve him, but at this moment, it didn't really matter.

"So you like it, huh?" she said, her voice muffled by his shirt. She felt him nodding to her hair. That made her ridiculously happy.

"Thank you," he whispered."It's perfect," he almost sobbed.

"Anytime, fox," she replied, leaning back to kiss his jaw."You want me to put it on?" He nodded in approval, slightly leaning down so she can reach around his neck.

As she clasped the string on his neck, she requested. "I want to ask you for something." He looked at her and pressed his lips together.

"For now, no more guilt, okay? No more angst. No more beating ourselves up for all the shit that went down. Just for now." She placed one hand on his chest while the other played with the mismatched pendant.

"I want to be with you. For as long as I can. And even if you believe that that's gonna be a long time and I don't, whatever happens, I just want to cherish every moment with you because you promised to never leave me again. Because promised that you love me," she pleaded. "Can I take that from you? Can you give me that?" she said, eyes darting between his to make sure that he understood. It looked like he wouldn't reply with anything for a while.

But finally, leaned his forehead on hers, his blue eyes piercing her own and kissed her softly. "I told you."

"Take everything."

To be continued.

Read and review. Please and thank you.